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BY

BERTHA M. CLAY

AUTHOR OF "DORA THORNE," "THE EARL'S
ATONEMENT," ETC., ETC.

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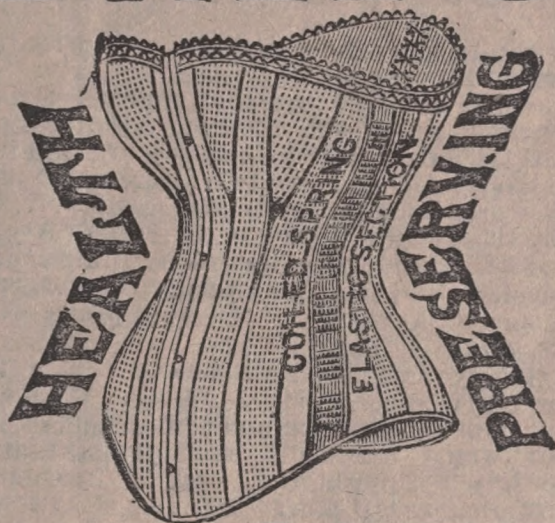
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BY

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BERNARD M. CLAY

IN CUPID'S NET.

CHAPTER I.

No matter where the Christmas stars shone or the Christmas snow fell, there was not in the whole world so desolate a girl as I. I had watched them, those fair stars, shining in a deep blue sky, in a different clime from this—a clime where roses grow well-nigh all the year round, and the silver seas are rarely ruffled by storms. I had watched them from between high gray walls which I know now to have inclosed the court of a convent; and since then I have watched them from the grand old gardens of Heron's Nest. All through my lonely, desolate childhood, uncheered by the warmth and the brightness of the sun of love, the stars were as friends to me.

Some one had told me, when I was quite a little child, about the wonderful Star of Bethlehem—how it had shone brightly in the winter sky; how king and shepherd had marvelled at it, and how “the wise men” had traversed the plains until the star set—set over a humble stable wherein lay the Holy Child. How many nights did I lie awake watching for that star, my heart beating faster if one appeared larger and brighter than the others, for surely, I thought, that must be the star! So lonely was I that in my childish dreams I had resolved always to follow that star when it came, for might it not lead me to some one who would love me? My star was long in rising, and, when at last I followed its light, it led me—my story will tell whither.

I remember, as in a dream, a journey over stormy seas; I hear far-off echoes of a voice; and I have a faint recollection of a face bending over mine. But the first vivid impression of my life is of standing at the window of the housekeeper's room at Heron's Nest, watching the shadows grow darker and the snow fall one Christmas Eve. There was no rejoicing in the grand old mansion. It was all

dark and dismal. The snow beat fiercely upon it ; the wind sobbed round it ; but loud and sweet above the moan of the wind came the chiming of the church bells. To me they spoke plainly enough. They said, "Christmas is come—Christmas is come !" I wondered if they said the same to every one else. I spoke to the only friend I had, Mrs. Paterson, the housekeeper.

"What do the bells of Heronsdale Church really say ?" I asked her.

"Bells do not speak," she replied, smiling.

"You cannot say they are dumb," I rejoined. "Listen !" —and slowly I sung with them, "Christmas is come—Christmas is come !"

Mrs. Paterson shook her head.

"Gracia," she said, not unkindly, "you are too full of fancies."

"To tell you the truth," I answered, "I hardly know what are fancies and what are not. Is it a fancy of mine that because it is Christmas Eve the snow falls more softly and the stars shine more brightly ? Is it my fancy that puts real music into the chime of the bells—that fills the air with a strange sense of mystery ?"

"Gracia," said the housekeeper solemnly, "you had better go to bed."

"Oh, no !" I cried ; "do not send me away. It is cold and dark in my room. Let me stay here in the warmth and light with you. I want to watch the sky and see if the Christmas star shines to-night."

She murmured to herself a wish that Heaven would bless the child and her fancies, but she was not angry.

"How fondly mothers will kiss their children to-night !" I went on. "How warmly will old friends clasp hands ! If one man has wronged another, how freely he will be forgiven ! I wish some one would kiss me."

"I will kiss you, Gracia," said the housekeeper.

And she did ; but it did not seem to satisfy the craving that I felt.

"Are you not happy here ?" she asked, kindly.

"How can I be happy when I belong to no one, when I have not a friend or relative in the world—when I have not even a name ?" I said, bitterly.

"You live in a beautiful house, you wear good clothes, and have everything a girl can wish for," she answered.

"I want none of those things," I cried ; "I want some one to love me."

"I have made a plum-pudding and some mince-pies," said Mrs. Paterson, with a view to diverting my thoughts. "You shall have a hot mince-pie for your supper, Gracia, if you will stop talking. You almost frighten me."

But plum-pudding and mince-pies had no charms for me. I loved the pale moonlight, the softly-falling snow, the light of the stars. I longed to go out and see if I could penetrate the mystery that seemed to lie around. I wanted to hear more distinctly the bells that seemed to chime: "Christmas is come—Christmas is come!"

That is my first vivid recollection. How the fair clime where the roses grew, how the high gray walls had disappeared, I could not tell. Here I was, a child of ten, and no one had the slightest knowledge about me. No one knew why I was at Heron's Nest; no one knew my parents, my name, my position. I might be the daughter of a peer or a peasant. I had not a friend. In the whole world there was not a more lonely child than I.

Every one called me "Gracia"—the housekeeper, the old butler, the head-gardener, the vicar, his wife and daughter; I had no other name. When any one said abruptly, "Gracia what?"—as people often did when they asked me my name—I could not answer. "Gracia," the simple name—nothing but "Gracia!" The keenest of all pains to me was having no name; and when I read the story of the shadowless man, I believed that I understood what he had suffered. I was part of the place, just as the pictures and statues and carvings were; and a grand old place it was.

Heron's Nest was one of the finest old manor-houses in England.

It was almost hidden by a wealth of luxuriant foliage, but was within sound of the sea. It had been built in the reign of Edward III., and was erected by order of the king for the use of his Queen Philippa. At that date, the pools of water in the district abounded with herons; so Queen Philippa gave to it the name of Heron's Nest. Afterward a large town sprung up near it, and this was called Heronsdale. The Dale woods have been made famous by artist and poet, and the river Dale, which ran through the manor grounds, contributed greatly to the beauty of the spot. The house itself was large and picturesque. Many additions had been made to the original structure; wings had been added to the east and the west. A broad terrace ran along the front of the house, from which

steps led to the garden below. The beauty of antiquity and the luxury of modern days were to be found side by side in the noble edifice. The rooms were large and lofty, light and bright—some of them panelled in oak, others decorated and furnished with all modern elegance. In the grounds one came upon charming nooks and dingles where least expected. Pretty fountains gleamed among the trees ; old-fashioned flowers bloomed in the gardens. The state apartments, so long closed, were magnificent ; the large suites of rooms to the east and the west were also very handsome. Heron's Nest contained some splendid specimens of the goldsmith's art, and valuable pictures and statues ; for the Dacres, who owned the place, were very rich.

The manor-house, with all its lands, had been given to the Dacres for important services rendered to the crown. The first possessor of Heron's Nest was a stalwart warrior named Stephen Dacre ; and from him it had descended in a direct line. Many a reigning monarch had offered titles to the squires of Heron's Nest, which, however, none of them would accept. They were proud of the title "squire," and would change it for no other. I once heard Mrs. Paterson say that she believed her master would rather be Squire of Heron's Nest than King of England ; and I believe it was true.

The squire who owned Heron's Nest at the time of my first memories of the place was called Wolfgang—a name of which, though not by any means an attractive one, he was very proud, because many of his ancestors had borne it ; and of this Wolfgang Dacre a story was told. When a young man, he spent a season in London, and there fell madly in love with a court beauty, said to be one of the loveliest women in England. He had not the least chance of winning her, for she was a duke's daughter and a great heiress ; she was a coquette too, false of heart as fair of face. The handsome young squire, who worshipped her as though she were a goddess, made a very agreeable addition to her list of admirers. She had no intention of marrying him ; but she enjoyed the pleasant pastime of flirting with him, and revelled in the sport. She liked to see the young man's face pale with emotion, flush with anger or love, just as she willed. She delighted in exercising her power over him, making his honest heart thrill with rapture, then sink with despair. He was the favorite of all her admirers ; but she never thought of marrying

him. True he was of ancient descent, his name one of the oldest in England, his wealth great; but then he was only a country squire, and she was a duke's daughter. She accepted his homage, smiled upon him until her beauty almost maddened him, wore the flowers that he sent her, let him clasp her hand until every nerve in his frame thrilled with delight at the touch, waltzed with him when the very sweetness of the music dazed him; but she never dreamed of marrying him. Had any one suggested such a thing, she would have been indignant. When the day came that Wolfgang Dacre laid all he had in the world at her feet, she laughed at him and held him up to derision. He left London then, never to return. He shut himself up in the old manor-house, a man whose life was embittered forever by the light love of a woman.

There he lived for some years. Lady Millicent married, and the tragical story of her death a little later created a great sensation. Soon after that, he went abroad, leaving his beautiful home in the care of Mrs. Blencowe, his housekeeper. Twice every year Mr. Graham of Thavies Inn, the squire's solicitor, went down to Heron's Nest and remained for a week, during which time he thoroughly examined the house, ordered all that was needful, attended to the accounts, and made all arrangements for the next six months. Occasionally—but it was a rare event—a letter came from the squire to the housekeeper; no one else however ever knew the nature of the contents. Everything went on from year to year in the same monotonous, quiet, peaceful way. Gradually the memory of the squire died from the minds of his people; and then I came upon the scene—whence no one at Heron's Nest or in the neighborhood could tell.

It seems that one fine April morning a letter came for the housekeeper, Mrs. Blencowe. After she had read it, she called the servants together, and told them she was compelled to go away for a time, as a friend of hers was ill and required her services. The housekeeper made her arrangements, attended to all that would be required during her absence, and then departed.

She returned when the June roses were blooming, bringing me. I was six years old when I came with Mrs. Blencowe to Heron's Nest. She never spoke to the other servants about me. She called me Gracia, and no one knew whether it was my own name or not—I was simply Gracia. So far as I remember, she was very kind to me.

At Heronsdale there lived a gentle, simple old man, the organist of the parish church, Michael Holt. He taught me music, and the rudiments of Latin, and made me acquainted with the beauties of English Literature—taught me for several years simply for love of me. Two years after she had brought me to Heron's Nest the housekeeper died suddenly. She was standing on the steps in the library, dusting some valuable books, when she fell down dead. The doctor who was summoned said the cause of her death was disease of the heart—disease of long standing. So I lost the only person who knew anything about me.

After she was dead, people did what they had never dared to do in her lifetime—they put innumerable questions to me. What did I remember—what had I seen? Where had I lived abroad—in what town? Was Mrs. Blencowe my mother, or was she my aunt? But I remembered nothing clearly, except the roses and the high gray convent walls; therefore I could not gratify their curiosity. It was possible that Mrs. Blencowe might be my mother, yet a proud instinct told me she was not. I was penniless, friendless, living at Heron's Nest on sufferance; yet I was proud as the daughter of any peer, and I do not believe that I ever lowered my head for any one.

No sooner was Mrs. Blencowe dead than there was quite a disturbance about me. Some of the servants said that the squire's solicitor ought to advertise for Mrs. Blencowe's friends. He did so, and they came forward; but none of them knew anything of me.

It was suggested that I should be sent to the workhouse or to an orphanage; but Mr. Graham would not hear of that.

"The squire would be angry," he said. "After all, the child will not cost much; she had better stay here for the present. I do not know the squire's address, or I would write and ask him what is to be done with her."

Then a new housekeeper came—Mrs. Paterson; and she was as much mystified as the rest with regard to me. She was kind, and at times even indulgent to me. The general belief of the whole household was that I was Mrs. Blencowe's daughter, and the servants treated me as such.

They were familiar and kind; but they regarded me as one of themselves, and only laughed at my love of books and study.

I led that life for some years. The only person who

treated me with any degree of respect was the vicar of the parish, the Reverend Ernest Sale. His wife never acknowledged me even by so much as a smile or a bow. She was highly connected, I believe, and was regarded as a model of elegance. The vicar's daughter generally passed me by with a look of cold contempt. Miss Sale was ambitious of being considered a county beauty. She intended to marry well, and altogether was a young lady of some importance. To them such a person as Mrs. Blencowe's daughter was not worth a moment's thought, and the only time that mother and daughter evinced any interest in me was when they both interfered to prevent me from singing in Heronsdale Church. I had a fine contralto voice, which, thanks to Michael Holt, had been well trained, and my dear old master was very proud of his pupil. He said I sung like a nightingale. The proudest hour of my young life was when I stood up in the choir of the old church to sing, and my solo was—

“Hark, the herald-angels sing!”

I forgot—even now the remembrance brings tears to my eyes—the church and the people, the vicar standing so silent, the choir looking at me with wondering eyes. My very soul went out in the beautiful words, and I saw only the Christmas stars shining in the blue sky ; it was to them I was singing.

After the service, Mrs. Sale, who at intervals had been exchanging angry glances with her daughter, whose voice was a sweet but weak soprano, came up and spoke to me. She said a girl in my position could not be too quiet or keep too much out of sight ; therefore it would be better that I should not sing in the choir again.

So faded my only gleam of happiness. I was not daunted, however. The old piano in the library was my best friend ; before I was sixteen I knew most of the popular operas, and was well versed in classical music.

When Mrs. Paterson found how fond I was of music, she told me that I had better give up what little housework I did, for it would spoil my hands.

“Some day,” she said, “you will, perhaps, know who you are ; then you will have to earn your own living, and you may do so by music. By the bye, Gracia,” she added, “I want you to walk over to the vicarage to-day to ask Mrs. Sale what butter she will want ; and mind, if you meet Miss Sale, that you make a proper courtesy to her.”

I! My eyes flashed with indignation. Yet, after all, who was I that I should not bow to the vicar's pretty daughter? a question to which I was unable to give an answer.

CHAPTER II.

WHEN I reached my seventeenth year, my mirror told me that I was not wanting in beauty. I could not, and did not associate with any of the servants; they had ceased to expect it. I spent most of my time in the library with the piano and books. There, three times a week, old Michael Holt came to give me my lessons; there all my dreams were dreamed; there I shed tears over my lonely loveless lot; there I hoped for a future that should be brighter than the past.

Should I ever find some one who would love me? Would any one care for a girl who had not even a name? Would any one ever disturb the charmed solitude in which I lived? Should I, like some heroine of fiction, go out one fine morning and meet a prince in disguise? How would my fate come to me? What would the future be like? What love was I hardly knew.

I opened a book at random one day, and in it I saw a poem called, "A Woman's Shortcomings," in my opinion one of the sweetest poems ever written:

"Go, lady, lean to the night guitar,
And drop a smile to the bringer;
Then smile as sweetly when he is far
At the voice of an indoor singer.
Bask tenderly beneath tender eyes,
Glance lightly on their removing,
And join new vows to old perjuries,
But dare not call it loving.

"Unless you can think, when the song is done,
No other is soft in the rhythm;
Unless you can feel, when left by one,
That all men else go with him;
Unless you can know, when upraised by his breath,
That your beauty itself wants proving;
Unless you can swear for life, for death,
Oh, fear to call it loving!

“Unless you can muse in a crowd all day
On the absent face that fixed you ;
Unless you can love as the angels may,
With the breath of heav’n betwixt you ;
Unless you can dream that his faith is fast
Through believing and unbelieving ;
Unless you can die when the dream is past,
Oh, never call it loving!”

And the words took possession of me, enchained me, and a voice in my heart told me that the future would lead me to a love like this.

I was still thinking of the poem, when one of the maid-servants hastily entered the room.

“Gracia,” she said, “Mrs. Paterson says you must come out of this room at once and go to hers. Mr. Graham has arrived, and he will not like to find you here.”

Away went my romance, my fair dreams vanished ; the bitter reality had come back. Mrs. Paterson was right. What business had a girl without a name in that sumptuous library? I would have given worlds to check the hot flush that rose to my face. In silence I laid down my book and quitted the room.

In the hall, as I crossed it, I met a gentleman—Mr. Graham, I knew. When he saw me, he stopped suddenly.

“Why, who are you?” he said. Strange that every one should ask the same question!

I could make only my usual answer.

“I am Gracia.”

“Gracia,” he repeated, slowly ; and I saw to my surprise and delight, a look of admiration in his keen eyes. “Are you the young girl supposed to be the late housekeeper’s daughter?”

My proud head drooped. What would I not have given if I could have said, “No!” Before I had time to answer, he added quickly—

“I, for my own part, do not believe that you are Mrs. Blencowe’s daughter ; but who you are is a mystery I cannot solve.”

The words delighted me. It was the first time that any one seemed to think it possible that I might not be Mrs. Blencowe’s daughter.

“The squire is coming home,” Mr. Graham continued, hurriedly. “I do not know on which day he will arrive ; but it will be some time next week.”

“Do you think he will let me remain here?” I asked, eagerly. “Does he know that I am here?”

"I cannot answer either question," he replied. "The squire has never mentioned you in any of his letters. I wrote to him when Mrs. Blencowe died, and said that you would stop at Heron's Nest, unless I heard from him to the contrary ; but he did not answer that letter."

"What shall I do?" I asked, despairingly.

"Do nothing," he replied. "Keep out of his sight for a time. I wish I could be here when he comes, but I go to Scotland to-morrow, and shall not be back for some weeks. I have no doubt that he will do something for you."

I felt more puzzled than ever that day as to who I could possibly be. I must be of good birth, I thought, for everything about me betokened race. But to what family did I belong? Ah, that was a mystery!

There was great excitement in the household when it was known that the master was returning. Mr. Graham remained only a few hours. The housekeeper had told him about my singing, and he sent for me to ask me to sing to him. I did so. When I had finished my song, he looked at me thoughtfully.

"You need have no fear for the future, Gracia," he said; "you have a fortune in your voice. I have heard none more beautiful."

"A fortune!" I repeated, dreamily; and then it occurred to me that I had never in my life had a shilling that I could call my own.

He spoke very kindly, telling me that sooner or later something must transpire with regard to my parentage, that I was to take courage, and that he would always be my friend.

Nothing was spoken of now but the coming of the squire. Quite an army of servants suddenly appeared; trim housemaids, cooks, footmen, coachmen, and grooms, all seemed to spring into existence at once. The state-rooms in the great mansion were thrown open, the picture-gallery was set in order. There I saw a portrait of the squire when he was quite a young man; and my wonder was that the Lady Millicent Branscombe could have resisted him, he looked so gallant and handsome. I loved the face, and when I looked at it I said to myself that the owner of it could never be cruel to me. There was a smile in the bonny blue eyes that promised well; but then the picture had been painted before he saw the Lady Millicent.

Within three days after the announcement of the squire's return, Heron's Nest was quite another place. It seemed to me a fitting abode for a prince. Now there was less room than ever for me. I could not mix with the crowd of servants in the hall; my feeling and instinct were against it. Into the renovated rooms I dared not enter. My favorite place, the library, was closed against me. My own little sleeping-room at the top of the house, whence I caught a glimpse of the sea, was my only refuge, and during the next week I lived almost entirely there.

At last I heard that the squire had come. I had pictured him always as he was in his portrait—smiling and handsome; but I had failed to allow for the havoc that years of sorrow and pain make.

It seems that for some days no one mentioned me to the master of the house, nor did he make any inquiries about me.

One night, when I believed the whole household to be asleep, I went quietly down to the library to get a book, one of Richard Proctor's, called "Other Worlds than Ours"—a book in which I revelled. There was no one there. I found my volume, and went back to my room with it; but a bow of pink ribbon fell unperceived from my hair. As the squire passed through the room early in the morning, he saw it lying on the carpet, and he picked it up. Just at that moment one of the housemaids entered the room.

"To whom does this belong?" the squire asked her.

"To Gracia," answered the maid.

She told me of the meeting afterward, and said that when the squire heard the name he recoiled as though he had received a blow.

"Whom?" he cried, in a loud voice.

And the maid repeated,

"Gracia."

"Send the housekeeper to me," said the squire, after pacing moodily for some minutes up and down the room.

Mrs. Paterson hastened to him, uncertain whether she was to hear praise or blame. The squire, when she entered the library, was standing before the great bay-window. He turned to her abruptly.

"I understand you have a young person named Gracia here. Who is she?"

"No one knows, sir," was the reply. "I found her here when I came, and she is here still."

"How did she come here?" was the next question.

"I cannot tell, sir. I have heard the servants say that the late housekeeper was called away suddenly, that she was absent some time, and returned with the child. I do not think any one in the house knows who she is."

A look of relief passed over the squire's face.

"But that is improbable—impossible, I may say! Some one must know!" he exclaimed.

"To begin with, sir, I do not," returned the housekeeper, with a dignified air. "As Gracia had been in charge of the former housekeeper, I took her under my protection. Mr. Graham said he was sure that you would not like her to be taken to an orphanage or a workhouse. No one owned her, though we all believed her to be Mrs. Blencowe's daughter."

She paused for a moment, while the squire paced up and down the room angrily. At length he came to a stand-still, and said abruptly:

"Send to me all the servants in the house."

So the butler, the head-gardener, all the old servants who were at Heron's Nest before I came, were called before the squire; but not one among them knew anything more than this—that Mrs. Blencowe, after being absent for some time, had returned with me; but whence she had brought me no one could tell.

Was it anger or relief on the squire's face when they were dismissed, and he stood thinking so deeply? At last he rang the bell again, and, when one of the footmen answered it, he said:

"Tell Mrs. Paterson to send the—the young person Gracia to me."

Mrs. Paterson brought me the message herself.

"Go, Gracia," she said, "and do not be afraid. Let the squire hear you sing, and he will put you in the way of making a fortune, I am sure."

But I went in fear and trembling to the library, where the squire awaited me. I found myself in the presence of a tall stately gentleman, whose hair was white as snow, and whose face, though marked by lines of terrible pain, was still handsome, with the fire of his blue eyes undimmed. But they were no longer laughing eyes; they were stern, hard, and cold, not at all like the eyes of the portrait. What was it that flashed into them when they fell upon me? I could not tell. Was it surprise, fear, love, or what? I knew not; but it was a look such as I have never seen on any human face since.

We stood motionless for awhile, each looking steadily at the other; then he started, sighed deeply, and shuddered. He came a step nearer to me, then drew back; finally he bade me approach him. He looked into my eyes as though he would read my soul, and then said slowly:

"So you are Gracia?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Nothing more?"

I had to pause, my heart was beating so fast. I wondered what was stealing over me. My eyes filled with tears; the sound of his voice seemed to stir the depths of my soul.

"I thought," he said slowly, "that Gracia was a child."

"I was a child not long since," I answered; "now I am growing up—yet helpless as when I was a child."

"And who are you?" he asked.

Always that same cruel question! I raised my eyes, blinded as they were by tears, to his face.

"I do not know," I answered. "No one knows who I am. The happy birds have a home; but I have none."

"Heron's Nest has been a home—has it not?" he asked gently.

"No one can have a home who has neither friend nor name," I returned bitterly.

"And you——"

"Have neither," I interrupted.

He looked at me for some moments in silence, then asked,

"How old are you, Gracia?"

"Seventeen," I replied.

"Tell me," he said hesitatingly, "what you remember of your past before you came here."

"It is so little that it is hardly worth telling," I answered. "I remember first being near the sea, in a land where roses grew even to the water's edge; and I can recall a face that used to bend over mine."

I saw the color leave his lips.

"Nothing more?" he asked sharply.

"Then I recollect high gray walls—convent-walls I know they were, because I remember the sisters' faces—a stormy passage across the sea, and my arrival here. It was only when I reached Heron's Nest that I really seemed to come to life."

"Did Mrs. Blencowe know your history?" he asked suspiciously.

"I believe not."

"She let fall no hint which might have proved a clew to your parents?"

"No," I replied. "I might have dropped from the clouds for all that any one seems to know about me."

He murmured something I could not hear distinctly, but it sounded like "Poor child!"

"Does it not strike you as a very strange thing that I should return home and find in my house a young lady"—how that delighted me!—"who has been living here for years, and of whom no one knows anything?"

"I do think it strange; and, what is more, I think it cruel," I answered. "I must have had parents like other people. It is to Heaven they must answer for their neglect of me."

He was still looking at me intently.

"Do you know," he said, "that you are a very beautiful girl?"

My heart beat with pleasure. No one had ever told me so before, and I knew so little of the outside world that I could hardly tell whether I was beautiful or not.

"Yes," continued the squire, "you are beautiful as—" He paused abruptly. "And what education have you had?" he asked.

I gave him a list of my acquirements, and told him that Michael Holt had taught me all I knew. Long afterward I heard that he had presented Mr. Holt with five hundred pounds, without however assigning any motive for doing so. Then I ventured to say that Mrs. Paterson had wished me to sing to him, adding modestly that I thought I might, with a little assistance, be able to earn my own living.

He smiled. Ah me, I shall never forget the beauty of that smile! It changed his face altogether.

"We shall see," he said. "Let me hear you sing, Gracia."

He went to the piano, which stood at the other end of the room, and opened it.

"Who taught you music and singing?" he asked.

"The man who has taught me everything else," I answered—"Michael Holt."

On the day before I had found a beautiful little poem, and the words had pleased me so much that I set them to music. I did not now stop to think whether the verses were suitable or not, but sung them:

"Oh, wilt thou have my hand, dear, to lie along in thine?
As a little stone in a running stream, it seems to lie and pine.
Now drop the poor pale hand, dear, unfit to plight with thine.

"Oh, wilt thou have my cheek, dear, drawn closer to thine own?
My cheek is white, my cheek is worn by many a tear run down;
Now leave a little space, dear, lest it should wet thine own.

"Oh, must thou have my soul, dear, commingled with thine own?
Red grows the cheek, and warm the hand—the part is in the whole;
Nor hands nor cheeks keep separate when soul is joined to soul."

"Whose words are those?" the squire asked, when I had finished.

I told him.

"And whose music is it?"

And I answered him—oh, so proudly!—that the music was mine.

"Yours?" he questioned, in surprise. "You must be clever! Sing something else that you have set to music."

This time the song was quite different; it was a more lively air:

"Gayly bedight
A gallant knight
In sunshine and in shadow
Had journeyed long,
Singing a song,
In search of El Dorado.

"But he grew old,
This knight so bold,
And o'er his heart a shadow
Fell, as he found
No spot of ground
That looked like El Dorado.

"And, as his strength
Failed him at length,
He met a pilgrim shadow.
'Shadow,' said he,
'Where can it be,
This land of El Dorado?'

"Over the Mountains
Of the Moon,
Down the valley of the shadow,
Ride boldly—ride,'
The shade replied,
'If you seek for El Dorado!'"

A cry of delight fell from the squire's lips as the last notes died away.

"Excellent!" he exclaimed. "A girl who can compose such music need not despair."

Then I took courage, and, looking into his face, asked the question that had been hovering around my lips from the moment I first saw him.

"Squire Dacre," I said, "no one knows anything of me; tell me, do you know who I am?"

I saw that for one moment at least the question paralyzed him; but he soon recovered himself.

"If I could solve the mystery," he returned slowly, "I should not need to ask all the questions I have put to you."

To my mind his evasion of the truth was painful and perceptible. If he had answered me frankly "Yes," I should not perhaps have dared to ask more. If he had said "No," I should have believed him. As it was, I felt that he had evaded my question. From that moment a strong conviction that the squire knew who I was—knew, in fact, my whole history—took possession of me.

"You hope then, Gracia, to live by your music?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes," I answered quietly.

"We will see what can be done. I must think matters over," he said. "You seem to have read a great deal."

I looked round the grand old library with considerable pride.

"Yes," I replied; "I have read most of the books in this room, many of them two or three times."

"We must have a chat about them some day," he said. "I have almost forgotten what books are here—I have been away so many years." He repeated the final words softly to himself—"So many years!"

From that I gathered that I was not to be driven from Heron's Nest because its master had returned.

"In the meantime, sir, will you tell me what to do?" I asked. "I cannot mix with the servants. Find me a place in your household where I shall not be forced to associate with them."

His lips quivered.

"I will think over it," he said slowly. "Meanwhile be patient, Gracia, be patient. I will see you again."

And that, I knew, was an intimation that I might go. I went; but life was not the same for me again—I felt so sure that the squire knew my whole history.

CHAPTER III.

"GRACIA, how did you get on with the squire?" "Are you going away?" "Does he know anything about you?"

Such were the questions that assailed me the whole of the day, from Mrs. Paterson down to the lowliest hand-maiden in the place. None of the servants resented the fact that I did not care for their society, and I could not but admit that their curiosity was only natural. They all wanted to know what the squire had said when he found that a young girl had been brought up in his household without his knowledge; but I felt that all their interest was kindly meant.

It was I myself who felt so strange. I was sure the squire knew something of me that he would not tell; I had read it in his eyes. Perhaps I was the daughter of some old friend of his; but, if so, why all this secrecy? There was no need for it. My heart and my head ached more than ever with the burden of the question, "Who am I?"

I thought the squire would be dignified, and avoid me; but, to my surprise, on the morning following our conversation in the library, he sent for me. This interview differed from the last; he did not look at me or question me so much.

"I gathered from what you said to me yesterday, Gracia, that you have been accustomed to use the library?"

"Yes," I answered; "it was my one place of refuge."

"And I have taken it from you."

"You are master here; it is your right," I answered.

"Then I will be a generous master, for I will give up my right to that room to you."

It was not merely the kindness of his words that affected me; it was the tacit acknowledgment of our social equality. These words proved to me that I was not the daughter of one of his servants. He would not have offered the use of his library to Mrs. Paterson or to any of her relatives. My heart beat proudly as I recognized the supreme importance of this fact to myself.

"I should not like your studies to be interfered with, Gracia," he went on, "especially if you wish to make any progress in music. Let us make this arrangement. I

pass my mornings out-of-doors, and my afternoons with my books. I will leave you the mornings, and you can spend the time in the way you like best."

This from the proud squire of Heron's Nest! He was never proud to me after that.

During the next three days I saw him frequently, and it struck me that his face always wore a look of anxious brooding care, as though in his mind he were debating some weighty matter.

Ah, how I longed to throw myself upon my knees at his feet, and ask him to solve the mystery that shrouded me! He could do it; I felt sure he could!

On the evening of each of these three days he sent for me to sing some of my own compositions to him; he professed himself delighted.

"What a gift you have, child!" he said. "Your name will be famous one of these days."

"Do you really think so?" I asked eagerly.

"I am sure of it, although I may not live to see that day."

"But you look strong," I said; "you are not old, though your hair is white."

"I have lived," he answered, "for many years with a rankling wound in my heart. The day will come when I shall die of it, and I care not how soon."

There grew up a strange intimacy between us. We were so near together yet so far apart. At times I read love in his eyes, at others something like aversion.

He came into the library on the second day after our arrangement was made, and found me engrossed in the intricacies of one of Chopin's difficult pieces. He stood for a few minutes behind my chair; then with his own hands he lifted mine from the keys and looked at them.

"You have beautiful hands, Gracia," he said—"the very hands for music." He looked at them until his eyes were dim with tears.

Every time I saw him, every hour I passed with him, deepened the mystery that lay between us. One day I was out in the garden, attending to some favorite flowers, when he came up to me.

"You like hollyhocks, Gracia?" he said.

"Yes," I answered, "very much. I love those verses in which Tennyson has enshrined them."

"Does it ever occur to you," he asked, "how exact Ten-

nyson is in his description of a thing? How accurate that one line is—

“ ‘Heavily hangs the hollyhock!’ ”

It does hang heavily. See how it bends with its own weight. Do you remember another line of his—

“ ‘Black as ash-buds in March?’ ”

I smiled to myself when I read it. I was in a distant land then; but I remembered how black the ash-buds were. Few other poets, to my mind, choose words so wisely or so well. I learned some grim lessons through him.”

Had he loved a Guinevere or a Vivien, I wondered, that he should say that?

I entered the picture-gallery one morning, and found him there. He was walking up and down, his face wearing its usual expression of deep thought and anxious consideration. After greeting me, he said rather abruptly:

“Gracia, do you like money?”

“I find that a very difficult question to answer,” was my reply, “for the simple reason that I never had any.”

“Tell me, dear,” he continued, laying his trembling hands on my shoulders, and seeming quite to forget the difference and the distance between us, “would you like to be rich—to have money, houses, and land?”

After a moment's thought, I answered:

“I would far rather have some one to love me than have all the riches in the world.”

“Poor child!” said the squire tenderly. “If,” he went on, after a pause, “you could have your choice between wealth and love, you would choose love?”

“I am sure of it!” was my quick reply. “I have lived in the world for seventeen years, and no one has loved me yet. My heart hungers for love.”

“Poor child!” he said again; and after that he seemed more thoughtful than before.

Another morning I found him in the library, writing busily. He looked up when I entered, and smiled.

“This is a terrible breach of our agreement,” he said. “You must excuse me this one morning, Gracia; I have something that I must do. I wonder,” he added, in a dreamy tone, “what impels me to write it to-day. Do, do not go,” he said, as I turned to leave the room. “You will

not disturb me ; on the contrary, I feel that I shall write better for seeing you. Sit down to your books, Gracia."

I did as he bade me—took my books into the sunny bay-window, and read, pausing now and again to glance at the squire.

My eyes, as though fascinated, followed his movements. I saw him open several private drawers in his escritoire, drawers that were evidently known only to himself, from which he took one or two letters. When he had finished the long epistle he was writing, he looked up and said :

"Gracia, will you send Mrs. Paterson and James Graystone to me ? I want them to witness this." He did not say what "this" was, but I saw a sheet of parchment closely written over. "Come back when they are gone," he added.

It struck me that, when the housekeeper and the butler reappeared, they both looked very important ; but they said nothing ; and I went back to the library, as the squire had told me.

I remember, just as though it had happened yesterday, every detail of what followed. The squire was standing up as I re-entered. On the table before him lay the small sheets of parchment, two or three long strips of printed paper, and several letters, one of which was in a violet envelope. The color struck me—it was a pale faded violet. Another envelope was fastened with light blue ribbon, a third was sealed with light blue wax. He took all these, together with the closely-written letter that he had just finished, and tied them together. I saw him write several words on the outside paper ; but I could not tell what the words were. Then he sat down and looked fixedly at the little parcel. He had tied it with red tape. In an idle manner he cut the ends of the tape and fastened them with wax. I remember the shape of the little parcel so well, and I also remember wondering if I should ever see it again. The writing-table was covered with old books, a map of the county lay on it wide open, with several other things. I went on reading for a few minutes ; then, as the squire seemed to be absorbed in thought, I felt that I had better leave him.

Shortly afterward Mrs. Paterson came to me in my solitary little room at the top of the house.

"Gracia," she said, looking earnestly at me, "has the squire said anything about helping you ?"

For the first time I rebelled against the question so kind-

ly meant. I felt as though there were something between the squire and myself which was sacred and was not to be intruded upon by strangers.

"Not at present," I answered rather coldly ; "but he seems interested in my music."

"Now, Gracia," said the housekeeper, "take my advice. Speak frankly to the squire. I am sure he is a kind-hearted man. Tell him what you want to begin life with. You ought to go to one of the grand music-schools in London or Paris, and he would send you to one if you were to ask him."

"I will think it over," I replied.

"Do," urged the good woman. "You see, Gracia, time is flying."

When the housekeeper had gone, I thought long and deeply over what she had said ; but I could not decide what to do. I felt that between myself and the squire there was something that no one else understood. Still I resolved to speak to him that very evening about my future.

The afternoon was a delightful one ; there was a crisp coldness in the air that made it a luxury to breathe. I had gone into the garden to gather some richly-colored maple-leaves, which, with some flowers, I thought would form a pretty nosegay. The squire was pacing up and down one of the walks with a thoughtful air ; but, when he saw me, his face brightened, and he came quickly to my side.

"I was just wishing that you were here, Gracia," he said. "I have been listening to the chime of the Heronsdale bells. What do you think they say to me ? They say, 'Long ago—long ago !' Such a mournful chime ; it has depressed me. The sound of your fresh young voice and of your merry laughter will be an agreeable change. I want you to talk to me and make me laugh."

"I will do my best," I answered, "although I find but little in life to laugh at."

Over the meadows came the sweet sound of the bells, and, as I heard them, I felt some of the depression that had fallen upon the squire. To me, too, they seemed to say, "Long ago—long ago !" What was his "long ago" like, I wondered. He turned to me so suddenly that he startled me.

"Do you believe, Gracia," he said, "that a wrong can be righted ?"

"I should think so, unless death intervenes," I answered ; and the words might have been those of a prophetess of evil.

"How do you mean?" he asked eagerly.

"I mean that a wrong can be righted, unless death steps in before it is accomplished, and so prevents it.

He stood silent for a few moments, while I went on gathering the pretty maple-leaves. Then he cried out to me—and his voice was broken with sobs:

"Gracia, Gracia, I am going to right a wrong! I must do it! I have a heaviness and a strange foreboding to-day. Those bells have unnerved me with their mournful 'Long ago—long ago!'"

He raised my face in his hands and kissed my forehead.

"Yes, Gracia, I am going to right a great wrong. I shall ride over to Heronsdale at once and see a lawyer I know there; then I shall telegraph to London for Mr. Graham."

How my heart beat!—for I felt sure that I was associated with it.

"Tell me," I cried—"have I anything to do with it?"

He looked at me eagerly, earnestly, and was on the point of speaking, but stopped abruptly. What was he going to say? Was I the child of some dear dead friend whom he had wronged, and was he now going to set that wrong right?

"To-night," he said, "I shall have a surprise for you. When I come home, you must join me in the library, and I will tell you then all you want to know."

I fell upon my knees before him with a passionate cry.

"Tell me now," I pleaded; "I have waited years for the knowledge! Have pity on me, and tell me now!" I felt that the color had left my face, and my lips trembled so that I could hardly speak.

"Tell me!" I entreated. "I cannot live in this suspense."

"You shall know all to-night, Gracia," he returned, gently. "There are several matters to be settled first, and I must see a lawyer."

"You promise to tell me who I am, all my history, who my parents are? Oh, Heaven, how shall I live until night?"

"I promise faithfully," he replied.

Again he kissed my forehead, and stood for some moments looking at me with longing eyes. Then he left me; and so great was my rapture, my fear, my agitation, that I fell upon the grass and buried my face in it.

I shall never forget that one hour of my life—the emotions that swayed me, the fear, the hope. What was it

that he had to tell me? What had I to hear? It might be that I had father and mother living, that I came of a good family, that I should find a home where I should be loved. Or it might be that I— But I hid my face, shuddering. I could not bear the reverse side of the picture.

Then I heard the sound of a horse's hoofs; and, looking up, I saw that the squire was riding Black Prince, the finest horse in his stable, but one of which the grooms were all somewhat afraid—a spirited animal which could not brook restraint. I watched rider and horse until they disappeared among the trees.

I should hear it at last—this story of mine. I cannot describe the suspense that I suffered, the agony of knowing I must wait some hours before I heard it. Only to imagine that I might have a mother still living, only to think that for me there might be a home somewhere, gave me a sensation of rapture. Loveless, joyless, and desolate as my life had been, something was about to happen now that I hoped would brighten it.

The memory of that afternoon, with its balmy air, its sunny warmth, its odor of autumn flowers, will remain with me until I die.

I remember how I sat upon the grass, weaving sweet fancies. At last I should have a name, a home, and friends! At last I should be as others were!

I could not go back to the house; it seemed to me as though I should not be able to breathe there. I felt that I must be out in the open air, with the waving branches about me. My whole soul was on fire with impatience.

I have read that, when a soldier condemned to die stands before the rifles that are pointed at him, in the one moment before they are fired he lives through the agony of a lifetime. So, in these hours during which I waited, I passed through the pain of years. I saw that the sun would soon begin to set, for the clouds in the west were growing crimson, and the birds were winging their way homeward. The soft shadows of evening were falling; the wind stirred the leaves of the trees; afar off I heard the rush of the river. When the sun rose on the morrow, when the birds began to sing, I should know all—know my name and my fate. To-morrow, to-morrow! Oh, was there anywhere in this wide world a heart that loved me, a heart waiting for me?

Hours must pass—hours, not minutes—before I should see the squire again. I tried by walking, to reduce the

fever of impatience that consumed me. I went through the woods, and at last came to a white gate that led from a field to the river. Here I paused, and saw what I imagined to be a knot of laboring men standing by the river-bank. They were talking together, and busy—I could not see what they were doing—with a rope. I waited some little time watching the scene, and then walked slowly home.

CHAPTER IV.

WHEN I reached the manor-house, I saw, to my surprise, little groups of men standing about on the lawn. The western sky was all aflame then, and a ruddy light fell upon house and trees.

Swiftly Mrs. Paterson came up to me.

“Oh, Gracia,” she cried, “do you know—have you heard?”

I flung my arms round the sturdy branch of the cedar against which I was leaning. A blow was coming, I felt ; but I did not dream in what manner it would fall.

“Come with me quickly,” she said. “I am sure that he wants to speak ; but I cannot understand him.”

“Who wants to speak ?” I asked.

“The squire,” she replied. “Oh, Gracia, do you not know ? The squire has been thrown from his horse into the river, and he is dying !”

Dying ! Oh, Heaven ! And with closed lips—lips that might never utter another word !

The ruddy light, the dark branches of the cedar, the white faces of the men, all seemed to mingle, and I fell forward upon the grass. The blow to my hopes was terrible. I had expected to hear my story that night, and the only lips that could tell it to me were closing in death !

Presently the giddiness passed off, and I rose to my feet. Mrs. Paterson looked at me with evident displeasure.

“This will not do, Gracia,” she said severely. “I come to ask you to help me, and you give way to your feelings.”

“I was so shocked and startled,” I answered confusedly.

“So was I,” she said ; “but I did not faint. You must come with me, Gracia. You will understand the squire better than any of us can. He has talked so much to you.”

"But," I cried, seizing her hands in my agitation, "he is not dying—oh, surely—surely not dying!"

"I am afraid so," she answered mournfully.

I felt stunned. It could not be—it could not possibly be that he was dying with my story untold. Poor miserable me! After all my hopes, to be so cruelly disappointed! It was more bitter than death. Alas, for my sweet fancies! I should never know now the clasp of a mother's arms or the sound of a father's voice.

"Come!" said Mrs. Paterson.

"How did it happen?" I asked, as we walked slowly up the grand staircase.

"No one knows," was the answer. "The squire tried to cross the river near the fording-stones instead of passing over the bridge. The grooms think that Black Prince shied at the stones. Anyway, he flung the master there. The doctors say the squire must have been lying there at least two hours."

"He fell into the water then?" I cried.

"No, he was thrown upon the stones, but the water reached him. None of us knew anything of the accident until Black Prince came home without his master. Then we felt that something serious had happened. Some of the men-servants were out to look for their master, and they met a laboring-man running to the Hall to tell us that the squire was lying on the fording-stones. They went there directly, and found that he was still alive, and they brought him home. The doctors from Heronsdale are still with him; but they say they can do nothing. He is beyond mortal help—the poor squire!"

Mrs. Paterson went into the room first, and had some conversation with the doctors. Then they both came out into the corridor, looking very grave.

"There is no hope," said one—Doctor Benson, of Heronsdale. "It is useless for us to remain; still we will stay if you wish it."

"Oh, do, sir!" sobbed Mrs. Paterson. "It seems such a sad thing for the poor gentleman to die without kith or kin near him."

"Has he no relatives?" asked Dr. Lyons, who was a new-comer.

"Some very distant ones—the Caryls; but all I know of them is that they are not in England just now. I heard the squire say so one day."

"He has been making desperate efforts to speak," said

Dr. Lyons. "I suppose you have no idea what he wants?"

"No," the housekeeper replied.

"Do you know if he has made his will?" was the next question.

"Yes," was the answer; he made it this morning. He sent for the butler and for me, and asked us both to witness it."

"Then I wonder what it is that he is trying to say?" said the doctor.

"I think I know," I interposed. "This afternoon the squire told me that he wished to see me in the library to-night, for he had something of importance to tell me. He knows my history, and he said that he would tell it to me this evening."

"Poor child!" said Dr. Lyons. "He will take that story with him into another world; he will never tell it in this."

I was in despair.

"Do not," I cried, "let him die until he has told me! He said that there was a great wrong to be set right."

"It is too late," answered Dr. Lyons gravely; "he will set no wrong right now. Was it of vital consequence to you?" he asked.

"He is the only person who knows anything about me, who can tell me my name and who I am."

"Come into the room," said Dr. Lyons. "Perhaps it is of you he is trying to speak."

We entered the apartment together—the doctors to watch the effect of my presence, I to see if it were indeed too late.

The room was large and lofty and handsomely furnished. I knew it well, for I had often been in it while the squire was away. There was a lovely view from the windows; the blue line in the distance was the sea. A few fine pictures, chiefly views of Italian lakes and mountains, hung on the walls. On the great state-bed lay the squire, but so changed—so changed! One would hardly have recognized him. The blue eyes were closed, and the gray shadow of death lay over his face. Ah, why was it that when I saw him so my heart melted within me? I forgot the doctors and the housekeeper; I forgot everything except that the only man in the world who had ever spoken kindly to me lay there dying. I knelt down by his bedside, and burst into a passionate fit of weeping.

"Hush, Gracia," said the housekeeper; "you will disturb him!"

The squire must have heard the name, for he opened his eyes. He knew me; his dying eyes rested on my face with a look that must haunt me until my own close forever—a look of intense love and longing. I turned my head away, sick at heart. It was a gaze no one could bear unmoved.

"He knows you," said Dr. Lyons.

Ah, yes, he knew me! He tried to hold out his poor feeble hands, but they dropped upon the coverlet.

"Speak to him," said the doctor.

I bent over him.

"Squire," I said, "do you know me?"

Ah yes, there was not a doubt of it! There was a faint flash in his eyes, a slight tinge of color came into his face. I took one of his hands in mine, but it was deathly cold. He knew me, for he made a terrible effort to speak to me. He tried so hard to utter one word, while we, all powerless to help him, stood round.

At last I took courage. I bent over him and whispered in his ear:

"Squire, is it of me—is it of Gracia you wish to speak?"

The poor lips parted and moved, but no sound came from them.

"You want to tell me who I am?" I said eagerly.

Again he made a desperate effort to speak; it was in vain. He sunk back with an air of exhaustion and despair.

And yet his despair could hardly have been greater than mine. If he did not speak again, there was nothing for me to look forward to but a blank and desolate future. In my anguish I turned to Dr. Lyons.

"Can you not give him anything to restore his power of speech?" I asked quickly.

"No," he answered gravely. "He is quite conscious: but he will never speak again."

I cried out in my despair. Surely, after my joyless life, Heaven would not be so cruel to me as to be deaf to my prayers!—and yet, looking upon the squire's pallid face, I knew there was no hope.

"It is a great trouble to you," said Dr. Lyons, looking compassionately at me.

"Greater than death itself," I answered.

I knew that the dying man heard me by the pained expression that came over his face. He made another great

effort, and drew me to him. Ah, why, why did his hand seek my face and my hair? What instinct made me kiss it, even while my tears fell fast upon it?

"If he could only speak to me!" I cried. "If he could but speak! One word would change the whole world to me; and he meant to tell me all to-night."

Then I bethought myself that I was allowing my great sorrow to make me selfish. I was suffering perhaps the sharpest trouble that anyone could endure; but, after all, the squire was dying—dying without kith or kin near him.

So I kissed the nerveless hands and smoothed the white hair. I laid my face, so rosy with health, near his. I heard one of the doctors say softly to the housekeeper, "What is she to him?" and the answer was "nothing." The squire did not hear it. He lay very still while I knelt by him; but I saw tears come into his eyes.

"He is weeping," I said to Dr. Lyons. "He must hear and understand, or that could not happen."

Then I felt his arm close round me. He drew my head down to his breast, and he tried to whisper, but I heard nothing except a confused sound. Suddenly he raised himself—it seemed to me by a superhuman effort; his face brightened, and in a loud voice he cried, "Millicent—Millicent!" His eyes looked as though they were gazing upon some bright vision. Then just as suddenly he fell back into my arms, dead; and my last hope died with him.

CHAPTER V.

I TOLD my story to the doctor who had been so kind to me. He sympathized with me in my great trouble, and did his best to cheer me.

"It is very sad," he said. "The poor squire had evidently something to say to you, if he could have spoken the world would probably have been very different to you."

As it was, standing by the squire's death-bed, I knew that henceforward I should be nameless, penniless, friendless—that the roof that had hitherto sheltered me would no longer do so. I should lose, besides, the few advantages I had had before. But the greatest, keenest grief of all was that, even if I had a mother living, I should never know it.

For a little while I had a faint hope that the squire

might have reached Heronsdale and seen the lawyer, and that some part of my story might be known to him ; but I found that he had not. The accident took place as he was on his way thither. So ended all my joyful anticipations.

Before the funeral I went to take a last look at the squire. As I gazed at him, lying so calm and still, with a smile on his face, the quaint lines came into my mind—

“Thank Heaven the crisis,
The danger is past,
And the lingering illness
Is over at last,
And the fever called ‘living’
Is conquered at last !

“Sadly I know
I am shorn of my strength,
And no muscle I move
As I lie at full length ;
But no matter—I feel
I am better at length.”

The appropriateness of the words struck me as I stood beside him. The fever called “living” was indeed over with him at last. All the passions that had surged within that quiet breast were still. There was no more to suffer or to enjoy. The fair face of a woman would never again cause him torture, nor would her falseness grieve him. The “fever” was ended. Never would tears of love or anguish come from the closed eyes ; never would sighs or tender words come from the sealed lips.

“The moaning and groaning,
The sighing and sobbing
Are quieted now.”

What had he seen—Millicent as he knew her in life, fair and lovely—or was it the last of a long series of visions that had passed before him ?

Because his roof had sheltered me, because I had been fed and clothed at his expense, because he was the only one who had seemed to care for me—above all, because he was the one in whose heart my story had been shrined—I stooped and kissed the face of the dead man. It seemed to me that as I did so a smile stole over it.

When Mr. Graham came, I told him all that had passed between the squire and myself. He seemed very puzzled.

“I can throw no light upon the mystery,” he said ; “but

I promise you one thing, Gracia. All the squire's papers must pass through my hands, and, if I see anything that concerns you, I will tell you of it."

I thanked him, but felt that it was slight consolation. It did not seem very probable that there would be much concerning me in the dead man's papers.

The squire was buried in the old family vault in the churchyard, where the Dacres for many generations had slept. After the funeral there was a great commotion in the house when it was discovered that there was no will. It seemed incredible, for both housekeeper and butler declared that they had signed one as witnesses. They were interrogated separately and together; but their testimony was always the same. The squire had told Gracia to send them to the library, where he awaited them. He had laid before them a closely-written sheet of parchment, telling them it was his will, and asked them to witness his signature. The squire signed first, and then they wrote their names. They did not see what he had done with the parchment. They had been too much astonished to notice anything.

The library was searched, the squire's escritoire, every probable and improbable place, but without result. I told Mr. Graham that I had seen the squire tie up a packet of letters, including that which he had written himself. A more vigorous search was made, but the little parcel could not be found. In the waste-paper basket, however, there were several letters all torn into the minutest shreds. Some, Mr. Graham said, were in the squire's handwriting; and, strange to say, we discovered fragments of a sheet of parchment.

"There can be but one solution to this mystery," said the lawyer to the vicar and the other gentlemen who had assisted him in the search. "The squire evidently made his will and wrote some letters, then destroyed all!"

Mr. Graham remained for some days at the manor-house. He seemed to like talking to me, and would send for me to sing and to play to him. One day, emboldened by his kindness, I asked him what would become of all the squire's property and money.

"They will go to his next of kin," he replied.

"I thought he was alone in the world?" I said in some surprise.

"The relatives that are left are distant enough. Lady Caryl is his second cousin, and Sir Adrian is her son."

"Sir Adrian Caryl!" I said to myself. To me the sound of the name was inexpressibly sweet.

"Sir Adrian is a very fortunate young man," continued the lawyer. "He is already very rich. But it seems a pity that the name should change. It has always been Dacre of Heron's Nest; now it will be Caryl."

"Will they live here?" I asked in bewilderment. "Will they come to Heron's Nest?"

"I should think so. Heron's Nest and all that it contains belong now to Sir Adrian Caryl."

"Is he married?" I inquired, hesitatingly.

"No, he is not married," replied Mr. Graham; "but I have heard that he is much attached to a beautiful young heiress, Lady Annabel Leith. I should strongly advise you to stay here until the Caryls come."

"Will everything belonging to the squire really go to him?" I asked. "How strange it seems!"

"Everything," replied the lawyer. "I do not think," he added, musingly, "that the poor squire's wealth could have gone to a better man. Adrian Caryl is very clever too, and in my opinion will be a famous man one of these days. Lady Caryl is quite wrapped up in him. In these degenerate times a son to be proud of is somewhat rare."

I had been so completely shut off from the world and knew so little of natural affection that it was delightful to me to hear of such deep motherly love. I longed for him to tell me more. All the brightness and beauty of the world seemed to be opening out to me.

Mr. Graham was most kind, and gave me the benefit of his advice.

"You cannot make your way in the world alone," he said, "and the best thing you could do would be to secure the friendship of two ladies like Lady Caryl and Lady Aditha Glynn. Stay here by all means! You need have no hesitation in doing so, as you have already been here so long."

So it was arranged that I should remain; and, after all, I was not sorry, for I had grown to love Heron's Nest dearly.

I lived on at the manor-house, absorbed in my music. At times we heard from Mr. Graham, and it was understood that the Caryls would take possession about Christmas. Every day something came from them—cases of pictures, statuary, securely packed, loads of ornamental furniture; and Heron's Nest soon wore quite a different aspect.

Scarcely anything else was discussed in the neighborhood but the coming of the Caryls. One of the under-servants had lived in a house where Lady Caryl visited, and she described her as being very handsome and stately, but proud. The old manor-house she said would not seem like the same place under her rule.

December came, and Mrs. Paterson had received several letters from Lady Caryl. What orders they contained! There must be fires in every room in the house; Lady Caryl could not endure cold. There must be an abundance of flowers; Lady Caryl could not live without flowers. Her ladyship could not give the exact date when they would arrive; but they might reach Heron's Nest either on the day before Christmas Eve or on that day itself.

The coming of the Caryls would be the turning-point of my life; nothing would be the same afterward. So I waited in silence and patience.

CHAPTER VI.

THE twenty-third of December, and the travellers had not yet arrived. All was in readiness for them. Cheerful fires burned in most of the rooms, and there was everywhere an abundance of hot-house flowers; the whole house seemed to be filled with the odor of them. Everything looked bright and fresh; and I thought in my heart what a fortunate being Lady Caryl was.

It was an ideal Christmas. The snow had been falling for several days—falling until the earth was an unbroken expanse of white, falling until it covered the bare branches of the trees and the leaves of the laurels and hollies. How beautiful it was, the soft white snow! Then came an intensely cold wind, and the snow grew hard—so hard, indeed, that when on Christmas Eve the sun shone out of the wintry sky, it did not melt it. I thought I had never beheld a prettier scene. The scarlet berries of the holly gleamed among the glossy green leaves, the sun threw a ruddy glow over the snow, and shone upon the white icicles that hung from hedges and trees until they glittered like huge diamonds.

There had never been any particular celebration of Christmas that I could remember at Heron's Nest. Now,

for the first time, I saw what Christmas was like in an old-fashioned country mansion. Great wreaths of evergreens, the red-berried holly and the glossy-leaved laurel, the mistletoe with its mystical berries, the laurestinus with its pretty flowers, the sombre-looking fir, were everywhere used for decorations. The bright fires, the profusion of flowers, the lovely evergreens, all combined, gave the whole mansion a cheerful, glowing, homely look that delighted me.

On the morning of Christmas Eve a letter came to say that Sir Adrian and Lady Caryl would reach Heron's Nest that evening, and that they would dine at eight. So they were coming at last! What would their coming bring to me?

I remember how slowly the hours of that day passed; and, when afternoon came, the colors of the earth and the sky were so beautiful that I could stay indoors no longer. The cold was intense. As the sun set, the solemnity of the scene impressed me deeply. All sounds were hushed, except the murmur of the wind among the trees, and the swift rush of the river between its high banks. It did not seem to me so very long since I had sat at the window of the housekeeper's room, watching the Christmas stars and wondering what they would bring to me.

I watched the deep blue of the sky fade into the darkness of night; and when the soft light of the moon fell upon the snow, the effect was magical. My heart was full of rapture. All the poetry lying dormant within me awoke into sudden life. I watched the stars come out; and there, shining among them, was the bright star that I called my Christmas star.

I had forgotten the coming visitors; I thought of nothing but the snow and the stars—the mystery and beauty of Christmas. I did not heed whither my footsteps led me, until I found myself close to what we called the postern-gate, a green door let into a thick wall covered with ivy, the ivy now being covered with snow and forming one of the prettiest little pictures conceivable, I thought, as I stood looking at it. The starlight fell upon it, and it seemed to me that one star—my Christmas star—had never shone with so bright a light as it did then. O beautiful star, whither had you led me?

Presently, as things are sometimes revealed in a dream, I saw a face grow, as it were, out of the ivy; and then I perceived that some one was standing just within the

doorway, looking out upon the snow-covered moonlit landscape. No cry escaped me ; I felt no fear. I had always fancied that the light of my Christmas star would take me to some one whom I could love, and its rays had brought me hither.

I looked up in admiration. Some one, describing the face of a great Saxon king, called it "fair, frank, and true." Were truth and frankness ever more clearly written than on the face of the young man before me? He had a noble-looking head and sunny brown hair ; his eyes were blue—laughing eyes, keen and bright, with dark, strongly-marked brows ; his face was clear-cut like a cameo, full of power and pride, yet so winning in its fair beauty that no woman could look at it unmoved. Hither the light of the star had brought me, and this was what its rays fell upon. I saw a tall manly figure, strongly-built, yet with an easy grace and bearing ; and my heart went out to it.

The dreams and hopes of my life seemed to have reached a crisis. I had always felt that the Christmas star which had attracted me meant more for me than it did for others ; I had always cherished a curious dreamy hope about it ; and now it seemed to me that the star itself had led me to the old postern-gate. And who was here waiting for me ?

It mattered not. Whoever it was, I had a strange feeling that henceforward my life would be changed and bound up in his.

The wind suddenly stirred the ivy-leaves ; the soft snow fell from them—fell upon them—and then he saw me. He started, and uttered a faint exclamation of surprise, then moved from the postern-gate.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "Do you want to go in?"

"No," I answered, shyly.

Our eyes met, and it seemed to me that in that moment I lived a life-time. I could not move, and my breath came with difficulty.

"Who are you?" he asked curiously.

"I am Gracia," I replied, forgetting for an instant that I had not another name.

"And who is Gracia," he said lightly—"Gracia, with the dark eyes?"

"I do not know," I responded, as usual, thinking to myself that I should have known if the squire had not died so suddenly that fatal night.

I saw his face clear and brighten as he said :

"Are you the"—he half hesitated here—"the young

lady of whom Mr. Graham spoke to me this morning? We called upon him as we passed through London—I did at least.”

“I am Gracia,” I answered.

“I forgot to mention it to Lady Caryl,” he added. “I will go and see her at once. So you are Gracia?”

The light of the stars seemed to have passed into the blue eyes that still held mine.

“Yours is a curious story,” he said thoughtfully. “I must have a long talk with you about it.”

I felt even then that I should like him to talk with me forever. The very sound of his voice delighted me, it was so rich and musical.

He looked round with a smile.

“May I be permitted to ask,” he said, “what Gracia is doing out in the cold on Christmas Eve?”

“I came out to look at the snow and the stars,” I answered; “it is such a beautiful Christmas Eve!”

“I love Christmas Eve,” he said, slowly, “and this is an ideal one. I have not seen so much snow for years. Do you like the snow, Gracia?”

“I could not tell you how much,” was my reply; and it seemed to please him.

The way in which he pronounced my name made it sound unutterably sweet in my ears. Suddenly it occurred to me that, although he had spoken of Lady Caryl, I could not be sure of his identity unless I asked him who he was. It must be Sir Adrian; still I had better ask the question.

“Are you Sir Adrian Caryl?” I said.

“Yes,” he replied; “and a very fortunate man I am to succeed to this grand old heritage. Do you not think so?”

“I do, indeed. I am glad it has come to you,” I answered.

“We reached Heron’s Nest earlier than we expected,” he went on. “Like you, Gracia, I like to be out in the starlight, and so came here.”

“We call this the postern-gate,” I remarked. “This is part of the old house that was built in Edward the Third’s reign.”

“You know Heron’s Nest well?” he said, smiling.

“I know and love every nook and corner in it!” I cried. “I have lived here the greater part of my life.”

“It is a grand old place,” he said gently. “But,” he added, quickly, “I must not keep you standing in the cold, Gracia; let us move on. Your story is indeed a strange

one," he continued, as we walked on slowly, "and I must say, it puzzles me. There must be some means of clearing up the mystery; and, if it is to be done, I will do it." He held out his hand and took mine. "You must have been most lonely and forlorn, poor child!" he said. "Now, remember you have a friend. I am interested in you, and will take care of you, if you will trust me."

Trust him! My heart had already gone out to him. I could only murmur words of thanks and gratitude.

"I must talk over the matter with Lady Caryl," he said; "she will know what is best to be done. I am sure she will be kind to you."

I looked at him, unable to speak simply because I wanted to say so much. I wanted to tell him how I blessed him for his kind words, and how fervently I hoped that I might remain at Heron's Nest, so that I might see him now and again.

Oh, fair and beautiful star, that had brought me to him whom I loved from the first moment I saw him, and whom I shall love until I die!

It was a new world into which I entered. I passed in at the postern-gate, leaving him there looking after me, and I left my old life far behind. The stars seemed to shine more brightly, and something I had never known before was beating in my happy heart and making my cheeks burn. I did not know why it was, and I did not stop to ask myself. Then, before I reached the house, I heard the chiming of the bells over the snow, the same sweet old chime—"Christmas is come—Christmas is come!" Christmas had indeed come for me, and had brought me a friend.

The radiance of the stars was in my eyes when I went back to the housekeeper's room. She looked at me in wonder. She had never seen my face brightened with happiness before.

"Gracia," she said severely, "where have you been? You must not run wild about the place now. You had better keep in your own room as much as possible until we know what my lady wishes."

The words did not hurt me, because I had the echo of those others lingering in my ears. My heart could not ache, because I had found a friend.

"I should like to see Lady Caryl," was all I said.

"They will pass through the hall as they go to the dining-room," she answered—"both Sir Adrian and my lady."

Sir Adrian! If the worthy housekeeper could have guessed how my heart beat at the sound of that name, she would have been astonished.

I stood in the deep shadows of the gallery and saw them pass. He seemed even handsomer than he had seemed before; she was a haughty and imperious-looking woman. For the first time in my life I saw a fashionable lady in evening dress, and Lady Caryl's velvet and diamonds entranced me.

Then I went to my room, and spent the remainder of Christmas Eve in watching the snow and the stars through the window; but I was happy, because my heart was warm with love. I smile now, with tears in my eyes, when I think of the fervor and the passion of that love—how I recalled Sir Adrian's face, his voice; how I kissed the hand he had touched; how unutterably glad and happy I was; how I knelt down at last when the Christmas bells had ceased chiming and thanked Heaven for having guided me to happiness by the light of a star.

I remembered the next morning the housekeeper's warning that I had better keep in my room; but I had some feathered friends, robin-redbreasts, who always expected me to feed them. They congregated on the lawn every morning, looking out for bread-crumbs. The breakfast-room opened on to the lawn, and I thought I should have time to feed the birds before her ladyship came down.

The sun shone brightly on the snow, the morning was a lovely one. My face, when I looked at it in the mirror, was so radiantly happy that I was half afraid lest anyone should note the change in it. The pretty redbreasts were gathered round me, eating the crumbs greedily, when suddenly I heard one of the long French windows open. Looking up, I saw Lady Caryl. With one white jewelled hand she beckoned me to her, and I went.

"Who are you?" she asked, laying stress on the word "you."

The inevitable question, and the inevitable answer:

"I am Gracia."

Her face darkened.

"Gracia?" she repeated, in a displeased tone. "I understood that she was a child. Come into the room. I wish to speak to you. Close the window; it is cold."

I obeyed her, and stood before her.

"So you are Gracia?" she said. "My son was telling me about you last evening. It is a strange story, one t

I do not at all understand. Do you really mean to say that you know nothing about yourself, that you have no clew to your own history, your parentage?"

"None whatever," I replied.

"It is generally believed that you are a daughter of the late Mrs. Blencowe, a person, I understood, who was very reserved and reticent. What do you think yourself?"

"I do not think it is true," I answered, "because I can remember faintly some part of my life before I ever saw Mrs. Blencowe. I have a story," I continued eagerly; "I am homeless, nameless, and friendless, but I have a story." My heart smote me as I used the word "friendless," and I grew warm with the memory of the promise made to me.

The cold proud eyes looked searchingly into mine.

"Why are you so sure of that?" she asked.

"The squire told me so on the very afternoon of the day he died, and he promised me that, when he came home in the evening, he would tell me my history. He said," I added incautiously, "that he was going to 'right a wrong.'"

"To do what?" asked Lady Caryl, incredulously.

"To right a wrong," I replied.

"What wrong might that be?" she asked, coldly.

"I do not know. If the squire had lived a few hours longer, I should have known my history; as it is, I am utterly ignorant of it."

The pride and coldness deepened in her face.

"You do not suppose that the squire had wronged you in any way, do you?" she asked.

"No; I have never thought of such a thing," was my answer.

"It will not do for you to encourage absurd ideas, such as thinking that the squire has done you a wrong, or that you have any right to remain here."

"I have had no such thought, madam," I replied. "I have never had one thought of the squire which has not been kind and grateful," I said warmly.

"Probably. There is nothing so hurtful to a young mind as indulging in false ideas. Try to steer clear of doing that. Romance is a fatal thing; no girl ever succeeds who is romantic."

I thought of the postern-gate and blushed furiously. What would her ladyship say if she knew of the meeting there?

Lady Caryl took the blush as a sign of guilt.

"You are romantic, I see, and I am sorry for it; but I

make some allowance for circumstances. Of course you have been dreaming that you are some great lady—that you have been stolen from your parents, who are anxiously waiting in their ancestral home to welcome you.”

If she had been anyone but Sir Adrian's mother, I should have hated her, she was so proud and scornful, so cold and haughty. She evidently mistrusted me.

“The squire was good enough to exercise charity toward you for some years, but I fancy it was done unconsciously. I do not think he knew you were here.”

I made no reply.

“I should like you to tell me yourself, who you think you are,” she continued; “tell me frankly.”

“I have never been able to form an idea. The most daring thought I have entertained is that I may be the daughter of a friend of the squire; but I shall never know now. My story lies buried with the only person who knew it.”

“You seem to have been pretty well educated,” she said.

And then I told her of my hope of being able to live by teaching music.

“You play and sing well then?” she said. “I am delighted to hear it. I care more for music than for anything else. Now tell me all that passed between the squire and yourself during the few days you spent together.”

I told her all—except that he had kissed me.

“So he died in your arms,” she said, more gently. “That certainly gives you a claim on us. I must think over what had better be done for you. In the meantime, if I want you to play and sing to me, you will oblige me, I am sure.”

“I will do anything to oblige you,” I replied, thinking to myself that it was because she was Sir Adrian's mother, and not by any means because she was Lady Caryl.

She unbent a little before I left her; but my eyes filled with tears as I went back to the lawn. She did not ask me to pass through the room.

It was a rule at Heron's Nest that every member of the household who could be spared, should attend church on Christmas Day. I did not go with the servants, nor, as a matter of course, with the family. I had a seat in the church at some distance from the great manor-house pew, but I could see everyone in it. I saw the proud, handsome lady who was like, yet so unlike, her son. I saw him, and the glory of the Christmas morning to me was complete.

Ah, the sweet calm happiness of the Christmas morning!

It was Christmas to me because I had found a friend. And my friend was one to be proud of; in the church there was no one like him. His head towered above all the others.

The vicar's wife and daughter were of course at church. Their seat was near the manor-house pew. I watched—may Heaven forgive me! with jealous eyes. I saw that Miss Sale was coquettishly conscious of Sir Adrian's presence. She really looked beautiful in her costume of velvet and fur and her prettily-trimmed bonnet. Evidently she admired him. I saw her look at him several times; but he seemed unaware that she was gazing at him. And then, suddenly, while the choir was singing of "peace on earth," I found that he was watching me, that his blue eyes were fixed intently on me. Ah, happy yet miserable me! I tried, first, to appear unconscious of it, then a burning crimson blush dyed my cheeks, and I buried my face in my hands.

At length the service ended, and the people left the church. Her ladyship entered the manor-house carriage that was in waiting for her, and drove home; but Sir Adrian joined Mr. Sale, and I saw the vicar introduce him to his wife and daughter. I saw, too, how the proud, fair face brightened for him. Was I jealous? I caught myself wishing that I had fair hair and a dainty bonnet trimmed with holly-berries, that I had a dress of velvet and fur. I found myself weeping bitter tears that I was not as other girls; and yet—it was the happiest day I had ever known!

CHAPTER VII.

THE primroses were in bloom once more. All the snow was gone; the cold winds had ceased to blow; the air was odorous with the breath of violets; and I—my life was so different that the world did not seem to be the same place as of old. There was only one thing that made me unhappy, and it was that Lady Caryl did not seem to like me. The change from the gloom of winter to the beauty of spring was not greater than the change which had come over my life.

On the third day after her arrival at Heron's Nest, Lady Caryl sent for me. She wanted to hear how I could sing, and she professed herself delighted with the result.

"You have a magnificent voice," she said to me, "and your style is good. You want a few finishing lessons, and then you will be an excellent singer. How remarkable that you should have such a voice!"

From that time she changed to me. But she never really liked me, and my very presence seemed to irritate her. She abominated mystery, and I was the very embodiment of it.

"I wish," she said to me one day, "that you had a second name. It is so absurd to call you Gracia."

"I have just the same wish," I answered.

"Why not call yourself 'Blencowe'?" she suggested. "It would be better than nothing."

"Because the name is not my own, and I shall never use it," I replied.

One morning—the Christmas snow was still lying on the ground—she sent for me, and said she wanted to talk to me. She had been thinking over what would be best for me, and she offered me the post of companion to herself. I was to read to her, write her letters, be at her service whenever she required it. It was stipulated that I was in no way to interfere with the lady's-maid, a very important person named Kate Fisher, or "Fisher," as her ladyship called her. But, whenever Lady Caryl felt inclined for music, I was to sing to her.

To my great delight, she gave me two pretty rooms facing the south, and my meals were to be taken there. She also most generously provided me with a wardrobe. There was nothing elaborate or expensive, but everything was pretty—print dresses, all pink rosebuds, some nice muslins, and a silk dress for my "best." I was to have a salary of forty pounds a year, which seemed to me a fortune; and I was unutterably happy, because every now and then I could see the man whom I believed to be peerless. Lady Caryl told me that he was delighted at what she had done.

During the first few days I did not see much of him. One of the first things that attracted my attention was a superb portrait of him. It had been painted in Rome by an eminent artist, and by Lady Caryl's wish it was hung at the end of the picture-gallery. I often went thither to look at the portrait, and was never weary of gazing upon the sunny brown hair, the laughing blue eyes, and the handsome face.

By this time—I confess it freely—I had grown to love

that face better than anything else in the world. It was my star, shining ever brightly in the dark sky of my life.

I suppose it was only natural that I should love him, for my heart was full, and up to this time I had had no one on whom to bestow my affection. All the love that lies dormant in a girl's heart was just awakening in mine, and, having no other object, it fell entirely upon him. Before I knew what I was doing, before I understood my own heart, before I was conscious of what was happening, I loved him with a love that was my doom. It never lessened, never faltered, never changed.

I look back upon it with pity akin to tears. It was surely the truest, the most loving worship ever given to any man. It was a perfect love, because I never hoped or thought of any return. To me he was a hero far above any other man. Ah, me, how beautiful it was, this love which filled my heart and soul !

I can remember, if by chance he entered any room where I was, how his presence was to me like a gleam of sunlight. I saw nothing else then. That one face shone out before me ; all others were in the shadow. When he spoke, his voice was the only sound that reached my ears. While he remained in the room, I saw and heard him only.

I never looked for or thought of any return. It was happiness for me to know that I was under the same roof with him, that I breathed the same air, that I looked upon the same scenes."

The time came when my very life was absorbed in my love ; and what a silent far-off worship it was ! How little he dreamed that, in the same house with him, lived one who loved the very sound of his footsteps ! How little he thought that there was one near him who would freely and gladly have laid down her life for him !

I never expected either that he would think much of me or care to speak to me. But I soon noticed that he liked my singing. At first he did not come into the room when he heard the sound of the piano ; but, after a few days, he was never absent, and would come in directly the first note was struck. He had the prudence not to address me ; but he would say to his mother, "I should like to hear a little music." While her ladyship reclined on her favorite couch, he would sit in the lounging-chair by the great bay-window.

Ah me, how I sung to him ! My soul seemed to rise to my lips and go out to him in song. On ordinary occasions I seldom spoke to him. I had not the courage to raise my eyes to his face ; but I could sing out the whole love of my heart to him, and I did. At times he would say to me as he left the room, "I thank you, Gracia ;" at other times he would simply bow as he passed me. But to know that I had been singing to him, to know that I had given him pleasure, was the greatest delight I had in the world. In my dreams—ah, those happy dreams !—he used to thank me with gentle words for my songs—used to look into my eyes and clasp my hands ; but in real life I hardly dared to think of my dreams. That they should ever be realized was inconceivable.

So in silence, and with ever growing fervor, I loved this ideal that I had made for myself. The great window where he sat was like a shrine to me ; the flowers on which his hand rested were sacred. The passion of my love seemed to fill my life ; but it was never told, no word of mine gave a clew to it. No one guessed it. The proud stately mother who worshipped this, her only son, the friends who visited him, the servants who waited upon him—no one ever suspected that the Gracia, who had no second name, loved that handsome young heir of Heron's Nest.

I thought of the moth and the star. Later on I read the story of Elaine. I read stories and poems of girls who had given their hearts unsought for, and whose love had not been returned. They all died in the end ; but that did not frighten me. I felt I would rather love him all my life without hope of return, and die of the bitter pain in the end, than win the passionate love of another.

Lady Caryl liked to listen to music in the gloaming, not when the lamps were lighted or when the sun was shining ; and one evening in May—an evening that will never be forgotten by me—I sung Shelley's beautiful "Serenade," which I had set to music of my own.

"I arise from dreams of thee,
In the first sweet sleep of night,
When the winds are breathing low
And the stars are shining bright ;
I arise from dreams of thee,
And a spirit in my feet
Has led me—who knows how ?—
To thy chamber-window, sweet.

"The wandering airs they faint
On the dark, the silent stream—
The champak odors fail,
Like sweet thoughts in a dream ;
The nightingale's complaint,
It dies upon her heart,
As I must die on thine,
O beloved, as thou art !

"O, lift me from the grass—
I die, I faint, I fail !
Let thy love in kisses rain
On my lips and eyelids pale.
My cheek is cold and white, alas,
My heart beats loud and fast !
Oh, press it close to thine again,
Where it will break at last !"

So I sung, thinking in my blindness that to die near him, to die even with my hand in his, would be to me a fore-taste of heaven. Yet my love was very humble, for I never thought my hand would touch his.

But on this night all the passion, all the wild deep love of my heart was aroused, and I sung as I had never sung before. Lady Caryl was lying on the couch, Sir Adrian sat in the recess of the window ; the dying light from the western sky filled the room. I could not suppress my emotion, so, rising from my seat, I passed quickly through the half-open window, across the lawn, down to the white gate where the lilacs grew—the gate that led to the river.

My heart was full. I laid my hands on the gate and bowed my head on them. Presently I heard footsteps, each one of which seemed to strike upon my heart, and a voice said :

"Gracia !"

Raising my face, I saw him ; he was looking at me with a new strange light in his eyes.

"Gracia," he said, "forgive me for following you ; I could not help it. What was there in that song you sung ?"

I knew what was in it ; but I could not tell him that it held all the strength and passion of my love.

"What was there in it ?" he continued. "I have heard many songs, but nothing like that, Gracia."

It was the outcry of a human soul ; but he must not know it.

"The words have a sweetness all their own," was all I said ; and for a few minutes he was silent.

My hero, whom I had worshipped at a distance, was

standing close beside me now, with something in his eyes and face I had never dared hope to see there.

"I do not wonder," he said, "that you set beautiful words to sweet harmonies. Your love of music can be seen in your face, Gracia." Then, after closely watching me for a few moments, he added slowly, "I cannot tell where, but I have seen a face in some picture just like yours."

"Did it please you?" I asked eagerly; for to win one word of commendation from his lips, I would have done anything.

"Please me?" he echoed. "I thought it simply the loveliest face I had ever seen."

"Then it could not have been like mine!" I said incredulously.

"It was. It had the same dark eyes and brows, the same delicate profile and beautiful mouth, the same dark curls, even the same dimple in the white chin. It must have been a picture of you, Gracia. Why, child," he added, passionately, "you are beautiful as a poet's dream! When I met you that Christmas Eve by the postern-gate, your beauty took me completely by surprise."

Ah, beautiful Christmas star, how I blessed the light that led me thither! But my beauty, the beauty of a nameless, friendless girl, what could it avail? Still, if it pleased him, it was dear to me.

"I shall always like my face better now that I know it pleases you," I said gently.

A nightingale began to sing in the wood near by, and we were silent for some minutes listening; then he continued:

"Please me? Ah, Gracia, that is a mild word! Do you think that I have no eyes, no ears? Do you think that I have listened to your singing without seeing the beauty of your face? Do you think that I have looked at your face without recognizing your fair sweet soul? I have said little to you; but I am sure I understand you."

And I was made so perfectly happy by those few words that I should have been content to die then and there. Oh, happy night, the memory of which was never to leave me!

"I always thought," he went on, "that to sing as you sing, one must have loved and suffered. You cannot have loved."

"I could have laughed aloud at the words. I had not

only loved, but I had almost worshipped him; and he knew nothing of it.

"I have suffered," I answered slowly.

"Poets learn in suffering what they tell in song," he said. "If it is suffering that has taught you to sing, why—" But he never finished the sentence. He took the hand that was lying idly on the white bar of the gate. "Poor child," he said, "at your age one ought to know nothing but happiness! Tell me a little of this lonely youth of yours."

I told him all that I remembered of my life; but, strange to say, so infinitely happy had he made me, so great was my delight, that I could hardly speak pityingly of myself.

"I promised you," he said, "that I would do my best to unravel the mystery that surrounds you; but I have had no success." Then, after a pause, he added, "I wonder what you will do with your life?"

A sudden, horrible alarm lest he should pass out of it seized me—an alarm that was like a shock from the cold hand of death.

"I hope I shall live here always. I never want to go away," was my answer.

"I am glad that you are so happy here, Gracia. Why should you go away? My mother treats you well; does she not?"

"Yes; but Lady Caryl does not like me," I said, slowly.

"What makes you think so?" asked Sir Adrian.

"She is never unkind to me, never exacting," I replied; "but she seems to have an idea that I am an intruder."

"Nay, Gracia!"—and the next moment he had bent his fair head over my hand and kissed it.

I can smile now, but then I trembled. It was as though a light of dazzling brilliancy blinded me. I could almost as soon have imagined one of the stars falling from Heaven, as that he should have acted thus.

"I think," he said gently, "that you are too beautiful, too accomplished for my mother to be very kind to you. She is naturally jealous."

"But," I interrupted, "she is Lady Caryl, and I am her nameless dependent."

"You will not always be a nameless dependent," he said; "you have the two gifts which rule the world. Your star will rise some day."

Looking at the handsome face bending over me, I said

to myself that my star had risen already, and had brought me to him.

From that evening, when we stood by the white gate that led to the river, he was quite changed to me. He sought opportunities of talking to me; he would follow me when I went for a ramble by the river or in the wood; he taught me all about the wild flowers and the birds. We went down to the beach, we climbed the hills; and he treated me always with the affection and kindness he would have shown to a younger sister. I never thought of what her ladyship would have said had she known. Why should I not drink to the dregs the cup of happiness held out to my thirsty lips? .

So my girlish love and hero-worship grew until it filled my heart, my soul, my life. I lived like one in a dream, dazed by my own great happiness. Yet no word of love ever passed his lips. No queen could have been treated with greater respect.

So the first few months passed, and I knew nothing of love but its sweetness; that there could be pain, bitterness, or jealousy, never occurred to me. "The moon shines on many brooks; the brooks see but one moon." Sir Adrian was kind to everyone, and was universally esteemed. But to me he was the one man in the whole world; I could see no other.

One day in the month of August the first terrible awakening came to me. I had never thought of any ending to my beautiful love-story, never thought that Sir Adrian might marry. I had lived so intensely in every moment of the present, that I had no time to think of the future.

It was Lady Caryl's wish that for some few months she and her son should live in retirement—she thought it due to the memory of the old squire; but in the month of August she emerged from her seclusion. She gave dinner-parties to the county magnates, and garden-parties, archery *fêtes*, and picnics to the younger folk. She told me that when any visitors were about I was to keep to my own room; so that at first I was completely isolated. Then it occurred to her that my music would be of service.

I was not introduced to any of the visitors; but I was spoken of as "My companion, Miss Gracia." My music gave great pleasure, and Lady Caryl, when she found that was the case, made me a present of some pretty evening dresses. I suppose I had good taste, for, with a simple dress and a few flowers, I could compete with satin and diamonds.

On this August day, when the first shock came to me, Lady Caryl had given a garden-party. She had not expressed any wish for my appearance, so for some hours I kept my room. At length I was told that I was wanted for something downstairs, and the temptation seized me to go round by the kitchen-garden and see the gayly-dressed crowd.

I saw two young girls, beautifully dressed, who were amusing themselves by feeding the peacocks on the lawn. As I passed on the other side of the hedge, I heard one of them say to the other :

"How would you like to marry Sir Adrian, and be mistress of this place?"

The words seemed to pierce my heart. Marry Sir Adrian! Why, if he married, what was to become of me? Marry him! I stood still, rooted to the ground with horror and dismay. Marry Sir Adrian, my idol and hero, who seemed to me entirely mine because I loved him so! The sun seemed to grow blood-red; the smiling beauty of the summer day was blotted out.

Then another clear, sweet girlish voice came to me over the hedge.

"I would marry Sir Adrian if he had neither money nor land, just for love of his bonny blue eyes and his handsome face," it said.

And the second blow was even more terrible to me than the first.

One speaker would marry him to be mistress of his broad lands, the other for love of his bonny blue eyes and his handsome face! To me, who had worshipped him as my ideal, who had idolized him, the matter-of-fact manner in which these girls discussed their willingness to marry him, was revolting.

I gazed anxiously at them. They were both young, both pretty; but, oh, surely Sir Adrian would never marry either of them? If he married, I must go.

I no longer found any pleasure in watching the gay crowd; I gave no heed to the message that had been brought to me—my heart was too sore. I went back to the house, to the picture-gallery, and stood there for some time looking at the noble pictured face and the smiling blue eyes. Ah me, those girls, well-born, well dressed, well-bred, could talk laughingly about marrying him—one, because he had broad lands, the other, because he had a handsome face! But there was no love like my love,

though he would never know anything of it ; it must be hidden from every eye, and die with me.

If the lips that were so firm, yet gentle, would but once—only once—open and say to me, “Gracia, I love you !” I should be satisfied. After that, I could meet even death with a smiling face.

But then I came to my senses. Who was I, that I should raise my eyes to him ? I was without even a name ; he was the proud owner of Heron’s Nest. Of course the day would come when he must marry ; and he must marry, too, in his own sphere.

CHAPTER VIII.

LADY CARYL, regarding me as an utter nonentity, evidently thought other people looked at me in the same light. She never appeared to be in the least degree disquieted with regard to Sir Adrian and myself. I saw her look anxious and nervous when he was talking to some girl whom she did not particularly like ; but she never evinced the least fear of me. I suppose I was not of sufficient importance.

But one morning Sir Adrian received some new songs from London, and he asked me to try them. In one of them a night-blowing cereus was spoken of.

“What is a night-blowing cereus, Sir Adrian ?” I asked.

“A flower that opens at night instead of in the day, and gives out a delicious perfume,” he answered.

“I should like to see it,” I said thoughtlessly.

He was so kind and seemed so interested that I had forgotten for a few minutes the great gulf between us.

“Would you ?” he cried. “I can show you a flower in the small conservatory that is just like it. Come, Gracia.”

How gladly I went ! The August sun was shining brightly ; the flowers in the conservatory, fragrant and fair, were a feast to the eyes. And I was alone with him in the midst of all that beauty and perfume.

Did my happy face flush with my secret ? Did it shine in my eyes ? I feared to raise them, for I knew it was there. He showed me many beautiful flowers. I am ashamed to say I scarcely looked at them ; I saw only the face that was all the world to me. He told me all about

them ; but I hardly heard one word—I was so engrossed in him.

“Gracia,” he said at last, “I do believe you are not listening.”

“I am, indeed !” I answered.

“Then I do not believe you understand what I say. Look at me, and tell me the last thing I said.”

But I knew if I looked at him I should not be able to utter a word.

“Indeed I heard you, Sir Adrian,” I answered.

“Then why do you not look at me ?”

I raised my eyes slowly. Ah, what did they say—what did they tell him ?

“Gracia !” he cried, then raised my hand to his lips.

A moment later we saw Lady Caryl coming toward us. She gave one quick look from one to the other—one searching look. Sir Adrian appeared unconcerned, but my cheeks burned hotly. Her ladyship said nothing to me, but told her son that the farm-steward was waiting for him. When Sir Adrian had gone, she turned sharply to me.

“How is it I find you wasting your time here, Gracia ?” she asked harshly. “I expect you to be at work. What has brought you here ?”

I told her of my thoughtless wish to see the “night-blowing cereus,” and she did not seem angry.

“I think,” she said, “it would be better if you did not speak so freely to my son. Although he is kind enough to take a little interest in you, you must remember the wide difference between you.”

“I have never forgotten it, Lady Caryl, and I never shall,” was my reply.

“That is right ; do not give yourself airs because you fancy you have a pretty face. Another time, if Sir Adrian, in his thoughtless kindness, should offer to show you flowers or anything else, say you are busy, and decline.”

Of course it was all right and proper ; between the nameless dependent and the master of Heron's Nest was a gulf nothing could bridge over. But, although it was right, my heart beat in rebellious anger. Oh, my love with the bonny blue eyes, eyes that compelled me to do his will, how could I decline any kindness he might proffer.

Then Lady Caryl sent me to the work-room. I was in a tempest of fiery anger, of hot indignation. My hands shook so that I could not hold my needle, my limbs trem-

bled, my cheeks glowed. Yet she was quite right—and that was the bitter part of it. What would she say if she knew that he had kissed my hand? I looked at it. It was as white and shapely as her ladyship's own, and the place where he had kissed it burned still. Ah me, if I had but been one of the crowd of well-born, well-dressed, well-bred girls, I should not have been told to say I was busy and decline Sir Adrian's kind attentions!

All that day Lady Caryl was very thoughtful. I saw that she was brooding over something. I was counting the hours until the gloaming came, when I should sing for him—sing out all my love for him.

I laid my dress of white muslin ready; I gathered blush-roses for my neck and my hair. I see myself now, standing before the mirror, a tall, slender figure in a white dress, the blush-roses in the dark hair and at my throat, my eyes bright with hope and gladness. I was going to see him; I should be in the same room with him for at least two hours. I should sing to him of the love that never dies, of the story that never grows old. I should meet his friendly glances. Perhaps he would even come over to me as he had done before, and say something pleasant to me.

There was a rap at my door. It was Fisher, her ladyship's maid. She looked with a meaning smile at the white dress and the blush-roses.

"You can take them off, Gracia," she said; "my lady bade me tell you you need not go down to the drawing-room to-night."

As a cloud darkens the face of the sun, so, on hearing these words, all my happiness died; the color left my face, my eyes grew dim, the blush-roses seemed to wither, all the joy and gladness vanished, and the chill and the blackness of night fell upon me.

I was not to see him! I sat in my room until midnight, listening to the far-off sound of music and song, with the very bitterness of death in my heart. I cried myself to sleep, thinking of the happy girls who were free to talk to him, of the one who had said that she would marry him for his broad lands, and of the other who would marry him for love of his bonny blue eyes.

On the day following Lady Caryl was in a more amiable mood. I had one delicious moment—I met Sir Adrian in the great corridor. His whole face brightened when he saw me.

"Gracia," he said, reproachfully, "why did you not come and sing last night? I missed you so much!"

I had no time to answer, for I saw Fisher in the distance, and I knew she told everything to Lady Caryl. But the words had made me quite happy again. If he missed me, nothing else mattered.

In the evening, just before dinner, Lady Caryl sent for me. She was in her boudoir, and she asked me to write some letters for her. Then she walked to the window. I suppose few people care to look into the face of those whom they are going to injure.

"You will have more liberty in the evening now, Gracia," she said at last. "We shall have visitors next week. Captain Fane, one of my son's old schoolfellows, is coming." She paused; then her voice grew harsher, more sharp and shrill as she continued, "Mrs. Roper, the general's wife, and Lady Aditha Glynn are coming too. Lady Aditha is a very fine musician, so that I shall be able to dispense with your services."

There was something else coming, I knew, I was breathless with suspense, with dread.

"I may as well tell you," she said, "that Sir Adrian and Lady Aditha are engaged to be married; it is an engagement of long standing."

Every word fell like a drop of molten lead upon my heart. I stood motionless, and I felt the color die from my face. Did some keen instinct tell her what she had done? She did not turn round; she never glanced at me.

"Of course," she went on, "I am not blaming you; but it is certainly an awkward thing to have a girl in your position about the house. I am sure I do not know how to explain it to Lady Aditha. I must trust to your good sense to keep out of the way as much as possible."

What could I say? It was all true; but I could not bear the truth. The last few words roused me; their very bitterness and cruelty stung me into passionate life.

"Your ladyship's wishes shall be obeyed," I replied; and my anger gave me strength to walk steadily from the room.

When I reached my chamber, I threw myself upon the bed and buried my face in the pillows. All I longed for was death. Was ever girl so miserable as I?

It was some time before I dared to look this new pain in the face. Sir Adrian was to marry Lady Aditha. I did not know until that hour how much I loved him—how

blank and cold my future looked. I tried to think what this new state of things would be like. Sir Adrian married! It meant that he would have some one to love with a supreme love, some one for whom he would always be tenderly solicitous, some one who would absorb all his thoughts, while I should be excluded. It meant that the few fleeting glimpses I had had of an earthly paradise would be rudely blotted out forever.

There would be no more sweet converse by the white gate that led to the river, no more rambles through the woods where the wild flowers grew, no more pleasant hours by the piano, trying over new songs or lingering over old ones. There would be some one else—some one with a right divine, a claim to his time, his thoughts? Alas, alas, there was no truth in dreams, no truth in the frank glances of sunny blue eyes, no truth in the smile which had seemed to me bright as sunlight, no truth in anything; for he might have told me he was going to be married! Yet why should he? His mother's nameless dependent had no claim on him.

I could go away when Lady Aditha was his wife. I need not stop to witness the happiness of another; but the prospect was intolerable. I had let my heart leave me and cling to him. I had made an idol of him, and now I had suddenly found out that he was going to be married.

What was she like, this Lady Aditha? Was she tall, fair, and stately? Would he walk by her side, look into her eyes, kiss her hand, as he had kissed mine? If he did so, I, seeing it, must die of jealousy. I could not bear it—and yet I had known always that my love was in vain. My love! Just because he had been kind to me, because from the height on which he stood he had looked down upon me, because in his goodness of heart he had spoken gently to me, was I to presume? And yet what a happy, thrice happy girl Lady Aditha must be!

I was flying down the south corridor in almost breathless haste. Her ladyship had sent for me, and that in every case meant speed. I almost ran against Sir Adrian, who laughed at my impetuosity. I had not seen him since I heard that he was going to be married to Lady Aditha Glynn. My heart beat so quickly and I trembled so violently that I could hardly stand. I felt my face grow white as the face of the dead. My ashy lips parted, but I could not speak. Sir Adrian caught both my hands in his, his

face brightened, a tender light came into his eyes ; but I steeled my heart against him. He was going to be married.

"Gracia," he said, gently, "I am so pleased to see you. Where have you been hiding? I have not seen you for days."

"What does it matter?" I asked myself, recklessly. "Why should he want me? He is going to marry a rich and beautiful lady." My eyes reproached him. What did he want with me?

"Why, Gracia," he exclaimed, "what is it? You have been ill; you are not happy; you have lost all your color and the brightness from your eyes."

What if I had? It mattered nothing to him, who was going to marry Lady Aditha.

"Gracia, speak to me!" he cried.

He looked as though he were going to take me in his arms and kiss me. A hot thrill of anger passed through me. Why should he want to kiss me when he was going to marry beauty and wealth? Let him kiss his betrothed. Yet, while my whole frame trembled with anger, my heart went out to him. Oh, love with the bonny blue eyes, how good you were to look upon! I wrenched my hand from his.

"I must go," I said, desperately; "Lady Caryl wants me."

If I had stayed there one minute longer, I must have betrayed myself. I hastened down the corridor, and he stood looking after me, distressed and grieved. Let him console himself, I thought, with the beauty and heiress he was going to marry. Yet the loving look in his blue eyes haunted me.

Had I lost my color? As I passed one of the large mirrors, I stopped to see if it was so. Yes, it was gone. I looked like the ghost of the happy girl who had stood under the light of the Christmas stars.

Two days later the visitors came—Captain Fane, a fine soldierly-looking man; Mrs. Roper, a most formidable-looking lady; and the lovely Lady Aditha. I saw them all from the gallery as they were going in to dinner. Sir Adrian was walking by Lady Aditha's side; but, beautiful as she was, he did not look like her lover.

How shall I describe her, this fair rival of mine, who was to wring my heart with unutterable anguish? She was a queen of blondes—fair as a white lily shining in the sun, with the dainty coloring that one sees in a pink sea-

shell, hair of the brightest gold, and eyes like great sapphires—a dazzling creature. I thought of the line—"A fair and radiant maiden, whom the angels call Lenore." She was tall and graceful, with beautiful white arms bare to the shoulder, and perfect hands. Broad bands of gold, from which diamonds flashed, clasped her peerless arms. Her dress was of palest lilac, trimmed with costly white lace.

What chance had I, dark-skinned, ill-dressed, nameless as I was? I almost hated myself for having presumed to love him? I watched her looking up with laughing eyes into his face; I watched him listening to her. Heaven forgive me, I could have slain her—slain her in her bright loveliness, so full was my heart of the keenest and most bitter jealousy!

For some days afterward it seemed to me that I was hardly conscious of what went on around me. There were several other visitors staying in the house, and in the morning I could see them all go out riding, driving, or walking, a happy, merry party. Sir Adrian and Lady Aditha were always together. Yet I saw too, from my window, that Sir Adrian never rode away without looking round, as if in search of somebody. Could he be looking for me?

The evenings were the worst and the hardest to pass. Although my room was at the top of the house, I could hear all that went on beneath me. I knew when the ladies went to dress for dinner; I knew when they emerged, attired for the evening. I could hear the hum of conversation at table, and, later, sounds of music and singing, and sometimes, when there were plenty of young people present, of dancing, and I, young and fair as they, sat in my room lonely and forlorn.

One evening in particular I remember so well. The moon was up, the air was sweet with the breath of flowers, every tree and shrub stood out clear and distinct in the brilliant moonlight. I could hear the strains of the "Manola" waltz, and the music seemed to stir my blood. A longing seized me to see what was going on. I went gently down the grand staircase, across the great hall, and out by one of the side-doors into the grounds. I knew that I could see into the drawing-room if I stood beside a climbing-rose that half covered the window-frame. The window itself was wide open. I could see without being seen.

Ah me, to be young, beautiful, and rich! Ah me, to be

loved! I could see the elegantly-furnished room, with its pictures, its flowers. I could see Sir Adrian waltzing with Lady Aditha. A more graceful, a handsomer pair could not be imagined. I saw Lady Caryl watching them with delight in her face. Lady Aditha waltzed to perfection. She wore a dress of dead-white silk, with a parure of rubies. Her fair face was flushed, her eyes shone star-like. As they passed, his arm round her graceful figure, her hair all but touching his cheek, I felt that just to have stood so for one moment, I would have given my life.

I could not bear the sight of my rival in his arms, and I turned away with a low, despairing cry. I ran to the white gate by the river. The grass grew tall just there, and I flung myself down to weep out the bitter pain at my heart. There was no one to see me, no one to hear me; I was alone under the broad night sky. I could hear the bitter sound of my own sobs die away; and, as I lay there, I thought of the light of the Christmas star. Ah, whither had it led me? What should I do?

"Gracia," said a voice, the sound of which made my heart leap, "Gracia, my poor child, what are you doing here? What is wrong?"

I sprung to my feet in an instant.

"Everything is wrong!" I answered passionately. "How did you know that I was here?"

"I heard that little cry of yours at the window," he replied. "Nay, do not be alarmed; no one else heard it. No one else saw you; but I did, and I followed you. Oh, Gracia, how I wish that you could be with us! How I hate to see you shut out as you are! It shall not be!"

But an angry spirit of opposition and sullenness came over me. Why should he care for me when the beautiful heiress whom he was going to marry was there?

"You cannot miss me," I said, defiantly, "when you have all those pretty girls there."

"There is no face in the room one-half so beautiful as yours, Gracia," he said, earnestly.

"That is treason to Lady Aditha," I returned, coldly.

"Lady Aditha contrasted with you, is like a white rose by the side of a queenly damask," he said.

"Then why—" I began, but hesitated.

"Why what?" he asked, with a smile.

I had been on the point of saying, "Why do you love her best then?" but I checked the words.

"Gracia," he went on, "do you not see I want to bring

about a complete change of affairs? My mother must—" He paused, and then said, abruptly, "Why, child, your face is all wet with tears!"

He caught me in his arms, and kissed me, with passionate murmured words—kissed me, he, the man whom I worshipped, he, the man who was to marry Lady Aditha! I tore myself away from him.

"How—how dare you?" I cried.

I was thinking of Lady Aditha. He believed I was angry with him.

"I could not help it, Gracia," he said, tenderly—"I could not, indeed! Those dark eyes of yours looked so beautiful, half blinded by tears."

"Let him kiss the tears from Lady Aditha's eyes!" I thought; and I hardened myself against him.

His handsome face grew pale and sad.

"Gracia," he said, sorrowfully, "I thought you cared for me."

Once more I ran away from him because I could not control myself. If I had remained, I must have cried out that I loved him.

After that, life became a positive torture to me. Every one talked about Sir Adrian and Lady Aditha—how rich he was, how beautiful she was, and how graceful, what a grand marriage it would be.

One morning Mrs. Paterson, the housekeeper, gave me the keenest pleasure I had known for some time.

"Ah, Gracia," she said, "Lady Aditha is beautiful; but she cannot compare with you! If you were a lady born, she would be nowhere."

And I managed to extract some little comfort from that.

August had passed, September was come, and the harvest-moon was shining. The visitors had been in the house some weeks, and there was no sign of their going. Since the night when he had found me weeping by the white gate, Sir Adrian and I had been strangers. I avoided him, and was most miserable in consequence. I knew that he wanted to speak to me; but I would not give him a chance to do so.

One fatal morning I was told that every one had gone out. I had heard Sir Adrian ride off, and naturally concluded that Lady Aditha was of the party. I resolved, while they were all away and I had the opportunity, to go to the library to obtain a fresh supply of books. Great

was my consternation, when I entered, to find Lady Aditha sitting there writing! She had declined going out at the last moment. I would have gone back at once; but it was too late.

"Come in," she said; "you will not disturb me."

I saw her look of intense surprise when I entered. She kept her eyes fixed upon my face for some time. Then she said, almost abruptly,

"Who are you?"

I had but the old answer to give; but this time I varied it.

"I am Lady Caryl's companion," I replied.

She smiled, graciously; and, when I saw how her smile enhanced her beauty, I asked myself in bitterness of spirit what chance had I?

"I did not know Lady Caryl had a companion," she observed.

She never removed her eyes from my face the whole time that I was in the room, and she persisted in talking to me. I wanted to go; but she asked me so many questions that I could not leave her. My impression of her character from that interview was that she was proud, selfish, and liked money. What she thought of me I did not know, but I know the result of our meeting. I know that she must have spoken disparagingly of me to Lady Caryl, must have poisoned her mind against me, must have told her that I was a dangerous person to have in the house; for Lady Caryl sent for me, and, in her coldest, haughtiest manner, said:

"I thought I gave you instructions that, while our visitors remained here, you were to keep out of sight?"

"I have done so as much as possible," I returned, bitterly.

"Yet I hear that you have intruded upon Lady Aditha Glynn. Mrs. Roper says it is a most indecorous thing. However, it shall not occur again. I have made arrangements for you to go to Heronsdale. Miss Kenyon has a school there for the education of young girls of the middle class, and she will no doubt consent to receive you."

"I am too old to go to school," I said.

"It is a question of manners, not of age," she retorted. "Pack your trunk to day; you must leave Heron's Nest to-morrow."

Without another word I quitted the room, my heart swelling with indignation at the injustice that had been done to me.

CHAPTER IX.

I WAS to go ; appeal was useless. I must leave the home that had been my only refuge, leave the presence dearest to me on earth. Oh, love with the bonny blue eyes, I must say "Good-by" to you ! I had made up my mind what to do. I would go to Miss Kenyon's ; but I would not stay there. I would make my way to London, and perhaps some day I might meet him again—I, a queen of song. I tried, but unavailingly, to stifle my pain with these reflections.

One thing however was clear—I had to pack my trunk. But where was it ? I remembered having brought a box with me when I was a child, and Mrs. Blencowe's saying to me, "I bought that as we passed through London." Where could it be ? None of the servants knew anything of it. Mrs. Paterson advised me to look in the lumber-rooms.

Looking in the lumber-rooms was very much like looking for a lost needle in a haystack. They were three large rooms at the top of the house, lighted by sky-lights. One contained boxes of every imaginable kind and shape ; but mine was not among them. The second was filled with old furniture and old pictures, and the third was a receptacle for well-nigh all the odds and ends it is possible to think of.

The third was the largest room of the three, and the brightest. I became quite interested in the variety of old and forgotten things that I found. I remember every detail of the afternoon so well. It was four o'clock when I went into that room ; the afternoon shadows lay long upon the grass, the birds were singing blithely.

Through the window in the roof came a ray of bright sunlight that fell upon the things that encumbered the floor. There was a violin that had not been used for years, an old easel, a pile of books, and a number of old picture frames. Everything was covered with dust, and large cobwebs hung from the ceiling. Evidently it was some time since the lumber-room had been touched.

My box was not there ; but I found many things that attracted my attention. In a distant corner of the room, where it was not very light, I saw some old engravings covered with dust, and near them lay something that I

recognized with a smile and a cry. It was the map of the county which I had seen last on the squire's table when he was making his will. I remembered the wooden rollers, the blue twist, the peculiar colors. It was like seeing an old friend; and it brought that past picture so vividly before me that for some time I sat silent, looking at it.

At last I opened it, and something fell from it. I stooped to pick it up; and there, fresh as it was when I had seen it last, was the parcel I had seen the squire pack up and tie with red tape. There was the closely-written sheet of parchment, there were the long strips of paper that looked like certificates, there were the letters that I had seen him inclose. Although I had never seen the packet since that eventful day, I knew it at once, remembering how the squire had fastened the ends of the tape with wax.

A perfect fever of excitement possessed me; I knew that I had found the lost will. But there was something more wonderful still than this. On the outside cover, in the squire's own handwriting, were these words—"To be opened by my daughter, Gracia, after my death." My eyes read, yet hardly saw the words. I fell upon my knees with the packet in my hands, for I had discovered—oh, thank Heaven, I had discovered the name of my father at last!

I knelt there with streaming tears and trembling hands, my heart too full for words, hardly daring to break the seals and read. "To my daughter, Gracia"—that was why I had loved him, then! The white-haired old man who had been so kind yet so strange to me, who had kissed me with tears in his eyes, yet, while knowing his relationship to me, had never spoken of it, was my father! Gracia Dacre! Thank heaven, I had discovered my name.

These moments were to me the most solemn of my life. I stood on the threshold of a mysterious shrine. I kissed the words "My daughter, Gracia." Oh, my dear, dead father, if I could but have kissed your face again!

Then, with the fervent words of a prayer on my lips, I broke the seals. I remember how the sunbeams from the roof-window fell across the papers, some of which were yellow with age, I remember the silence that reigned in the room, unbroken save by the rustling of the pages I turned in my hands. The first thing I read was the long letter which I had seen the squire write on that well-remembered day in the library; and this was what it contained—

"MY DEAR DAUGHTER, GRACIA : I write this letter in your presence, and, as I write, I look at you and wonder what you will think of me when, after I have passed away, you know that I was your father. I wish I had the moral courage to tell you now, to take you in my arms and kiss you ; but I am afraid and ashamed. I ought to be proud of you, for you are as beautiful as your mother, who was one of the loveliest women in Spain.

"You are my child, Gracia, yet I have never told you so. False pride withheld me. I will tell you the story of my life ; then you can condemn or pity me as you will. Perhaps you will know for yourself some day how the Dacres love ; perhaps you will know the fever and passion men call 'love.' It consumed me. She is dead—the beautiful Millicent whom I loved—and I will say no word against her—only this, that she betrayed me."

I remember how he had uttered the name when he lay dying, and what a bright light had come into his face.

"She was a fashionable lady, my poor Millicent. I was only a country squire ; but I would have died for her, Gracia. She lured me on with sweet words and loving glances. I felt sure she loved me ; but one day when I asked her to be my wife, she gave me a cold, contemptuous look and refused my offer with scorn. She killed the good within me ; nevertheless nothing could extinguish my love for her. She married. Of her after-fate I need not speak ; all England knows it, and she has long been dead.

"I became a confirmed woman-hater after that ; and what was worse, I grew proud of the reputation. I liked to hear men aver that no woman could ever win Wolfgang Dacre. I lived for years in a state of proud defiance, and then I went to Spain. I honestly believed that my heart was dead, and that no woman had the power to draw a smile or a sigh from me. I met your mother at Granada, where she was living with an uncle—for she was an orphan, Gracia ; she had one of the loveliest faces that the sun ever shone on, and you are the living image of her. We were married in the Church of San Geronimo, Granada, and the long strip of paper you will find inclosed, marked No. 1 is the copy of the marriage certificate of Wolfgang Dacre of Heron's Nest, in the county of Kent, England, and Isola Valida of Granada, Spain. The original is to be found in the registry of the old Church of San Geronimo.

"Now I have a shameful confession to make. Your

mother, Isola, was young and beautiful; she was deeply in love with me, but she was not as Millicent. I had believed myself madly in love with her; but when I had been married a few months, I grew tired of her.

"Poor Isola! I tried to hide my feelings; but I am afraid she found out the truth. She was beautiful and loving; but she was not as Millicent. My very soul cried out for her, who had been dead so many years—Millicent, who had lured my heart from me only to fling it away. You will ask—and the question is a natural one—why, having married your mother, did I not bring her home to England and acknowledge her? My answer is this. First—and I am ashamed to confess it—I had lost all interest in her. Poor Isola! I did not care to bring her to England and introduce her to my friends. The second reason was, I had been so proud of my reputation as a woman-hater that I was ashamed to have it known that I had married.

"Then you were born, Gracia, I should have worshipped you had you been Millicent's child. You had Isola's eyes and all her dark loveliness. But there was no room, poor child, for you in my heart! When you were a year old, my old restlessness and the craving for change came over me, and I went away on my travels again. The paper marked No. 2 is the certificate of your baptism in the Church of San Geronimo, in Granada; and you were given the name of Gracia Isola.

"After awhile your mother faded. May heaven forgive me the share I had in her unhappiness! I repent it most bitterly. I wish that I had brought my wife and child home to England and acknowledged them. I would do anything to atone for the sin now; but it is too late. I was with her at the last. She died in my arms, and she forgave me before she died. The paper marked No. 3 is the copy of the certificate of your mother's death. She was buried in the cemetery just outside of Granada. If ever you go to see her grave, you will know it by a white marble cross which bears but one word—'Isola.' I sent you, a little child only three years of age, to the convent of San Angelo; and when you had been there some time you became very ill, and it was feared you would not live. Then I sent for my faithful old servant Mrs. Blencowe. I told her the story of my marriage, and bade her to take you home; but, before doing so, I made her swear to me that nothing should ever induce her to breathe one word of what I had unsealed to

her. The paper marked No. 4 is a copy of my letter to Mrs. Blencowe ; that marked No. 5 is the letter she sent me from Heron's Nest, announcing her safe return with the child Gracia.

"I may as well tell you the truth, Gracia. I went further and further afield in my travels, always hoping to forget Millicent, and I forgot you. My lawyer wrote to me when Mrs. Blencowe died ; but I did not receive his letter until some months after it was due, and then I said nothing. I knew that you must be staying on here. Mine is a sorry story. I was a bad husband, I am a bad father ; but I will right the wrong I have done you. Forgive me, Gracia. I am old ; my hair is white, and my eyes are dim. Forgive me, my child. As I write these words, you are looking at me, and my heart melts within me.

"When I came home and found you so beautiful, so graceful, so accomplished, I repented of what I had done more bitterly than ever ; but it was too late. My pride will not let me avow that I have overcome my hatred to women and have been married ; it will not allow me to own that it is my own child I have so cruelly neglected. I could not bear the shame and humiliation. I could not endure the wonder and comments while I live ; after my death they will not hurt me.

"Inclosed in this parcel you will find a letter addressed to Mr. Graham, in which I tell him also my story and place you under his care. I do you justice at last, my child. I leave you the whole of my fortune, Heron's Nest, with all it contains—everything I have in the world ; you are my sole heiress. The only other relatives I have are the Caryls, whose fortunes do not concern or interest me. So, Gracia, I make you amends at last. I wish I could do it in life ; but my pride will not let me. I should like to feel your arms clasped round my neck, and to hear you call me 'father ;' but I could not bear the sneers of those who knew that I was a woman-hater.

"The paper marked No. 6 is the letter to be given to Mr. Graham. No. 7 is my will. Your eyes will not fall upon these lines until I am dead. When you read them, think kindly of me, and take warning not to love with the madness of a Dacre. It is love for Millicent that has ruined my life, and your mother's and yours—nothing else.

"Good-by, my daughter. I shall hide this packet in my escritoire ; but at my death it will no doubt be found. Good-by, Gracia."

It was clear that, after writing this letter, he had repented. When he talked to me of righting a wrong, he was going that very day to consult with the Heronsdale lawyer as to the means of doing it, and he met with his fatal accident on the way thither.

I sat for some minutes feeling utterly bewildered. Then I looked at the parchment sheet, and read the words—"The last will and testament of Wolfgang Dacre, Esquire, of Heron's Nest." The will was short, but conclusive, for it left everything he had in the world—houses, lands, moneys, pictures, plate, carriages, horses, books, jewels—to his beloved and only child, Gracia Isola Dacre, daughter of Isola Dacre, his wife, whom he had married at Granada. It was signed by himself in a clear bold hand, and witnessed by the housekeeper, Margaret Paterson, and by the butler, James Graystone.

The shock was almost more than I could bear, and it was with difficulty that I could keep from crying aloud. My whole frame trembled; my heart seemed to stand still. So I was no nameless dependent. I was Gracia Dacre, sole representative of the proud line of Dacres and heiress of all their wealth. I was no longer the despised companion; I was Gracia Dacre of Heron's Nest. Far and wide as I could see, everything belonged to me; and it is little wonder that my heart swelled with exultation. No longer should I be confined to the servants' hall and my solitary bedroom; there should be no more haughty requests that I would keep out of the way when visitors were in the house. The house was mine! Never again would groom and footman call me "Gracia" and patronize me! Never again would proud, beautiful Lady Aditha call me an intruder! I was her social equal now.

In the first flush of pride my thoughts flew to Mrs. Sale and Miss Sale, the two women who had despised me so utterly, who had interfered with the only pleasure I had in life by preventing me from singing in the church. What would they say when they heard that the girl they had snubbed and scorned was the heiress of Heron's Nest?

And Lady Caryl, who had resented my presence, what would she think—she, who had been so coldly contemptuous, who had ordered me to leave the place because one of her visitors had seen me? What would she say when she knew the house belonged to the despised dependent? I rehearsed the scene. I pictured her face when she heard

that I was the squire's daughter, and my heart beat almost madly with fierce angry pride, for I had been made to suffer so severely.

Ah, Lady Caryl, you will be sorry now for your scorn and your contempt! You will wish that you had treated me better, that you had been more gentle, more kindly.

Then the tears fell fast and warm down my face and my heart softened with gratitude; the fierce, exultant pride seemed to die. Ah, fair and beautiful Christmas star, was this indeed the place to which your light had brought me? Then the bare walls of the lumber-room faded, and I saw instead the green postern-gate, covered with ivy, and the ivy holding the white snow in its green leaves. I saw the blue night-sky, and the Christmas star shining brightly, and, framed by the green ivy-leaves, the face that was as the sun of my life. Oh, my love with the bonny blue eyes, had I for one moment forgotten you?

Suddenly a chill came over me as the thought flashed across my mind, "My gain would be his loss! If Heron's Nest came to me, he must lose it. If all the squire's money and lands became mine, he must be the poorer for it. I was actually stepping into his place, taking from him that of which I knew him to be unspeakably proud. I who loved him was about to deprive him of a fortune. I who almost worshipped him was going to enrich myself at his expense. He had been so proud to call himself Caryl of Heron's Nest, and now he would be able to do so no longer.

And I loved him. Only two days since I had looked at his portrait, and had wished to be able to do something to show my gratitude for his kindness. I had said to myself then that I would give my life for him, and had longed for an opportunity to prove my affection. Here was one! If I loved him better than wealth, better than life, better than anything in this world, now was the time to show it. Let me destroy those papers, the only evidence of the truth—destroy them, and let everything go on as before. My own self-respect was secured; I knew that I was the squire's daughter, and the knowledge of that fact must always support and comfort me.

If I loved him, how could I take this fortune from him, now that it was in my power to make perhaps as great a sacrifice as any woman had ever made for a man, the greater because it would be completely concealed, and no one would ever know of it?

I would take the papers and destroy them. They should never know, either mother or son, what I had done for them. I gathered the papers quickly together and wrapped them in my little muslin apron ; then I opened the door, and went swiftly down the staircase. At the foot I saw Lady Caryl, evidently just on the point of coming up to me.

CHAPTER X.

WE looked each other steadily in the face. In her eyes there were anger, irritation, and curiosity ; in mine—I felt it—there was power. For the first time we met as social equals ; but I must not say so. Then she glanced at the white bundle in my arms.

“What have you been doing up-stairs ?” she asked. “I sent for you some time since, and was told that you have been in the lumber-rooms all the afternoon. What have you been doing ? I do not know what may be there, and I do not like any person to go prying about the house as you have done.”

I looked at her in wonder. It was of my house she was speaking ; the house and all it contained were mine, not hers ; but for Sir Adrian's sake I must not proclaim it. I saw that her anger was at a white heat. In all probability Lady Aditha had been speaking of me again, and irritating her against me.

“What have you been doing in those rooms,” she demanded.

“I went first to look for my box, since your ladyship has decided to send me from the only home I have in the world. I could not find it ; but I have been looking over the contents of the rooms.”

“An exceedingly impertinent thing ! You had no right to do anything of the kind,” she said, angrily.

“What would she say,” I thought, “if she knew what I had found there—if she knew what I had wrapped in apparently careless fashion in my apron ? What a fall her pride would have !” And I could not prevent the exultation I felt from showing itself in my eyes. She saw it, and grew even more curious.

“What have you there ?” she demanded.

“I decline to tell you Lady Caryl,” I answered, firmly. “It is something that belongs not to you, but to myself.”

"You have taken it from those rooms," she cried.

"I have ; but it is my own," I returned, calmly.

"Nothing here is your own," she said, hotly, her face growing pale with anger ; "everything belongs to me. You have no right to carry from this house a single thing without my permission."

Involuntarily my hands closed round my white apron and its contents. I knew that I was going to destroy the papers ; but for those few minutes I felt proud of the knowledge that I was mistress of the house and all it contained.

"Will you let me pass, Lady Caryl?" I said.

"No," she exclaimed ; "you shall not pass until I know what you have there wrapped up in your apron."

"Then I shall have to stay here forever, for I shall show what I have to no one."

"You will show it to me," she said, biting her lip.

I paused for a few moments to consider the position. It would indeed serve her right to let her see the papers ; and for a moment the temptation to show them to her was strong ; but I had resolved to make the sacrifice for my lover's sake.

"I have no wish to threaten or to use violence," her ladyship went on more calmly ; "but I will see what you have there. If you refuse to show me, I shall send for the butler and one of the footmen, and they shall take it from you."

Of course she could do that, and in the hands of two strong men I should be powerless. They would take the documents from me in an instant, and then— Ah, my love with the bonny blue eyes, that should never be ! I clasped the little parcel more tightly.

"Lady Caryl," I implored, "be just to me. I swear to you what I have here belongs to me, and to no one else. Please let me pass and go free. I will leave the house and never return."

But she would not listen to my appeal. I saw that she was debating in her mind whether she should take my parcel from me by force or not, but evidently her sense of propriety conquered.

"I must and will see what you are secreting there," she said, knitting her brows. "Choose at once. I shall either call the men or you must give to me of your own free will what you have hidden there."

"That I will never do," I returned, resolutely.

"Come down to my room," said Lady Caryl, peremptorily. "I do not see why I should stand in this draught. Go before me to my boudoir."

And I obeyed her. Ah, what would she have said had she known what I carried in my apron?

We went into the boudoir, and then she closed the door.

"Put what you have in your hands upon the table," she commanded.

I declined to do so.

"I intend to see what it is," said Lady Caryl, firmly.

And I as firmly declared she should not.

Was it a good or an evil spirit that led Sir Adrian to the door just at that moment?

"Can I speak to you, mother?" he asked. "I will not detain you long."

"Come in," she answered. "I am glad to see you, Adrian."

He looked with wonder from her to me, and then at the white bundle in my arms.

"What is it?" he asked, hurriedly. "What is the matter with you and Gracia, mother?"

"Adrian," said Lady Caryl, "I shall be glad if you will support my authority. I have made arrangements for Gracia to go to Miss Kenyon's at Heronsdale. For many reasons I do not think it advisable that she should remain here. Lady Aditha has been speaking to me about it, and she is of the same opinion."

To my great surprise, he muttered something about Lady Aditha that was not at all complimentary.

"I told Gracia, to-day," her ladyship went on, "that I wished her to pack up and go. Under the pretext of seeking for a box, she has spent the whole of this afternoon in the lumber-rooms, and it seems to me that she has taken what she liked from them."

Ah, thank Heaven, his face flushed with anger at the cruel words? Then his eyes were turned with infinite tenderness on me.

"Mother, you cannot possibly know what you are saying," he cried.

"I do," she returned, stiffly. "Gracia has spent the afternoon in those rooms, and I met her stealing down the staircase with this bundle in her arms. I want to know what it contains. She refuses to tell me; and as she persists in her refusal, I have brought her here, and shall compel her to let me see what she is carrying away with her."

If she knew—if she only knew !

“Mother, I am surprised at you !” he cried, indignantly. “I can hardly believe that you can say such cruel things. I would trust Gracia with my life.”

Then I found my voice.

“Sir Adrian,” I said, “I assure you that what I have here is my own, entirely my own, and belongs to no one else.”

“I believe you, Gracia,” he returned, confidently.

“And I, Adrian,” said Lady Caryl, “call upon you to help me to assert my authority, and to force that rebellious girl to obey me, and tell me what she is carrying from that room.”

“Sir Adrian !” I cried.

“My son !” appealed Lady Caryl.

He looked from one to the other in great distress, at a loss what to say, indignant for my sake, yet his respect for his mother preventing him from uttering one word that would offend her.

“Gracia,” he said at last, “I am quite sure that what you have there is your own. I do not doubt your word ; but could you not, as my mother wishes it, tell her what you have in your apron ?”

It was hard to have to refuse his request ; but I must do it to save him.

“I am so very sorry,” I replied ; “but indeed I cannot, Sir Adrian.”

“You see, Adrian,” observed her ladyship, “that she will not and dare not.”

He looked deeply grieved, but turned to Lady Caryl.

“Mother,” he said, “I had almost forgotten what I came for. The Duchess of Morley, your old schoolfellow, is here. She has but a few hours to stay, and she wishes to see you.”

“The Duchess of Morley !” repeated Lady Caryl, hurriedly. “I am delighted. But what shall I do with Gracia ? I am quite determined that she shall not conquer me. I will see what she has there.”

“Let me settle that for a time,” he rejoined. “Gracia, you trust me, do you not ? Let me take charge of that.”

My heart gave a bound. How could I say “Yes” ? How could I say “No” ?

He turned to a little buhl cabinet that stood near.

“Give it to me, Gracia,” he said. “I will lock it up here until we have time to go into the matter.”

It was a moment of terrible suspense to me.

"Will you promise me," I asked, "that no hands shall touch it—not even your own—and that no one shall see it?"

"I promise," he said, gravely.

"You will give it back to me unopened and untouched?"

"Yes," he replied.

I fastened my white apron more tightly round the little parcel, tied the ribbon-strings into the closest knots, and then handed it to him.

He placed the parcel in the buhl cabinet, locked it, and gave me the key.

"That is to prove how I trust you," he said, earnestly.

"Do not remove that parcel, Garcia, until you have made some arrangement with my mother. I trust you. Now, mother," he said, turning to her ladyship, "come and see the duchess. She will be impatient; and to-night or to-morrow we can settle this unpleasant business;" and he kissed her.

"You will not oppose my wish, Adrian, that Gracia leave the house at once?" said Lady Caryl.

"My dearest mother, we will see to that to-morrow, when everything shall be peaceably and happily arranged. Now smile and look bright, or the duchess will think you are not happy."

Lady Caryl smiled.

"You are a good son to me, Adrian," she said, gently; "you never vex me."

And then—heaven bless him! he came over to me. He took my hands in his, not heeding his mother's presence.

"I am so sorry, Gracia. There is some mistake, my dear. I will see it rectified."

Her ladyship's eyes flashed with anger.

"How long did you say the duchess would remain?" she asked, coldly.

"Some hours, mother," he replied.

And then, Lady Caryl, taking her son's arm, quitted the room.

They left me standing there, with the key of the buhl cabinet in my hands. I remained motionless for a few moments, then went to my own room, feeling bewildered, and as if I were in a dream.

I could hear, after a time, the sound of the piano; and I knew that Lady Aditha was singing, and felt that Sir

Adrian was standing by her side, as he would never again stand by mine.

It seemed to me the very irony of fate. I was the squire's daughter and heiress ; this was my own house. If those below had known who I really was, even the duchess herself would have been pleased to see me, and would have congratulated me. But the sacrifice was for Sir Adrian ; and I would have sacrificed more for him. What pleasure would money or lands give me if I knew that I was robbing him of either ?

I would go on the morrow, but not to Miss Kenyon's. I would make my way in the world, pass out of their lives, and some day in the long years to come I would creep back just once to Heron's Nest, and look at them all again, unseen myself—look at Sir Adrian, with the handsome face and the bonny blue eyes—my love, whom I should love until I died—look at his beautiful young wife and his stately mother ; then—

But here I found myself with the tears raining down my face. Was it for this I had followed the light of the star to the postern-gate ?

CHAPTER XI.

AFTER a time I grew uneasy. I knew that Sir Adrian was the soul of honor, and that I had the key of the buhl cabinet ; but what if by any accident those papers should be seen ? It would be easy for me to give up the comfort and luxury of the grand old mansion ; but I could not bear the thought of his doing so. Yet, if he had the faintest notion of what the papers contained, I knew he would see justice done.

The more I dwelt on the idea of my sacrifice the better it pleased me. Now indeed I could give a proof of my love although it was known only to Heaven. Now it was not merely a phantom love that I could see in my own mind ; here was a tangible proof of how dearly I loved him. What greater sacrifice could a woman make ?

My love should never leave Heron's Nest for me. He should live here with his beautiful young wife and children, while I went out alone into the cold world. For him should be the pleasure, for me the pain ; for him the bright happiness of life, for me its unutterable woe ; for

him the wine, for me the lees—and he would never know what he owed to me. Perhaps, when I was on my death-bed, I might tell him. But no; that would spoil all. My sacrifice must be complete. On my gravestone I would have only the one word “Gracia,” even as my mother had simply the word “Isola.” My heart was on fire with the desire of self-sacrifice; and I even loved the pain I felt, because it was for his good.

But I must have the papers, whether it was dishonorable or not. He trusted me; but I must break his trust, and let him think what he would. I must get those documents and destroy them, come what might. How was it to be done? Lady Caryl spent a great deal of her time in her own room; but, when darkness set in, and while she was in the drawing-room listening to Lady Aditha’s singing, I might steal into the boudoir and take them away. Then, when I had made away with them, I would go to Sir Adrian, tell him that I had betrayed his trust, that the packet was gone, and give him back the key.

But the night would not grow dark; the harvest-moon shone brightly, and a lovely subdued light lingered in the sky. My every pulse thrilled with impatience. What if Lady Caryl should be seized with a sudden caprice to see for herself what the papers contained? My plan of self-sacrifice would be vain then. Ah, no, my love—I would rather be buried alive with the packet in my arms!

I listened, with my heart throbbing painfully, on the grand staircase, where stood a marble statue of the goddess Flora with a basket of roses at her feet. There was no sound, except of music from the drawing-room, where Lady Aditha was singing. The servants seemed to be all in their own part of the house; there was no one to see or to hear. The moonlight streamed through the windows of the hall, and lay in great white patches on the staircase; it silvered the roses at the goddess’s feet, and by its light I crept slowly, quietly downstairs, thinking as I went of the night when I had followed the light of the Christmas star.

I reached Lady Caryl’s boudoir. There was no light, except that of the moon, which fell silver-white across the buhl cabinet. With a quickly-beating heart I unlocked the door. There the papers lay, untouched. In silence I took them away.

What should I do with the precious packet? It must be destroyed; but it was not an easy thing to do. Even if I tore the letters into shreds, there would still be the rem-

nants. There was no fire in any of the rooms to which I had access ; I could not go to the kitchen. A sudden idea came to me. I would take the package just as it was, fasten a heavy stone to it, and fling it into the depths of the River Dale.

The idea delighted me. I wrapped a shawl round my head and shoulders, and, holding the packet tightly in my hand, went out. As I passed the door of the large conservatory, I saw by the light of the moon the shadow of a man's figure ; but he did not appear to see me as I hastened along.

How fair the landscape was, the moon shining upon the turf and upon the leaves of the trees, which rustled gently in the wind ! The calm brooding silence of night lay around me as I walked on leisurely. There was no need to hurry now. I had the packet in my hand, and the River Dale was shining in the distance. At length I reached the bank, and stood for some moments looking down at the water that would be the grave of my hopes, that would roll over the proofs of my birth and my fortune, sacrificed for the sake of my love.

Presently I sat down upon the grass, and tried to realize how Sir Adrian would look if he knew all. How his blue eyes would brighten, yet reproach me ! How his face would change from grave to glad, and back to grave again ! Never shall I forget the beauty, the serenity of those few minutes I spent by the banks of the river in the moonlight, with the papers in my hand.

Then I found a heavy stone, and I fastened it in my apron ; the weight was quite sufficient to sink a much larger parcel than the one I held in my hands. I walked with it slowly to the water's edge. I kissed it. Farewell to name, to fortune, to every hope in this world for my love's sake—for my love's sake, farewell ! And, as I raised my arm to fling the parcel into the stream, I cried, "For my love's sake !" And then, shall I ever forget the horror of that moment ?—a hand seized mine, and took the parcel from me.

"What are you doing, Gracia ?" exclaimed a voice that chilled my heart. It was Sir Adrian.

I staggered back, white, trembling, and faint. For some moments I could not recover myself ; and then I broke into a wild passion of tears.

"Oh, give it to me, Sir Adrian !" I implored. "I pray you, for Heaven's sake, give it to me !"

"I must know what it is, Gracia ; I cannot let this go on. I have a suspicion that it is something connected with yourself, and I must satisfy myself."

In my despair I sunk upon my knees at his feet.

"I beseech you, give it to me !" I cried. "For my sake, for your own sake, for Heaven's sake ! I shall go mad if you touch it !"

He looked at me.

"I could refuse you nothing that was reasonable ; but in this instance I must be master ; I must know what this is."

When I heard his tone, when I saw the expression on his face, I knew all was over, and sunk sobbing upon the grass.

"I am grieved to distress you, Gracia," he continued ; "I cannot bear the sight of your tears ; but I must protect you against yourself."

By the light of the moon I saw him untie the parcel and take out the great stone and throw it away. I saw him take out the papers and scan them. I could hear the rustling of page after page—the certificates, my father's letter, and finally the will. Then I became unconscious. It seemed to me that the moon and the stars fell to earth, that the river rose and swept me away.

When my eyes opened at last, I saw neither moon nor river—only the face of the man I loved bending over mine with a look in his eyes to have won which I would have laid down my life.

"Gracia," he was saying, "Gracia, my noble generous darling ! Gracia, open your eyes and look at me."

Then I sat up gazing at him with dim, wondering eyes.

"Gracia," he said passionately, "what have you to tell me ? I know everything. You would have deprived yourself of name and fortune. Why—tell me why ?"

And I answered him :

"For your sake. I could not bear that your loss should be my gain."

When the words had passed my lips, it seemed to me that the river rose again, and carried me away. When I came back to life, there was no river in sight, my love with the bonny blue eyes had disappeared, and I was lying in a room that was strange to me. The village doctor was standing by my bed, and Mrs. Paterson and Kate Fisher were also in the chamber.

"That is better," said the doctor ; "now we shall do !"

The sun was shining brightly into the room. Whither had Sir Adrian gone? Where were my papers? I started up with a wild cry when I remembered them.

"Hush," said the doctor. "You need not fear! You have been unconscious several hours. It was night when I came; it is morning now. You must be quiet and rest."

I closed my eyes and tried to sleep; but it was impossible. My senses were once more as clear as ever. I remembered all that had happened by the river. Sir Adrian knew my secret now—knew the story that the papers told, and why I wanted to destroy them. Now what would be done? They told me to rest, but I could not; my head was burning, the blood coursed like liquid fire through my veins. Soon everyone would know that I was Gracia Dacre, daughter and heiress of the squire; but Sir Adrian would lose Heron's Nest.

It was a terrible fever while it lasted. In my delirium it seemed to me that the river was bearing me away down to the sea. I fought with it, struggled with it, cried out to the waters not to drown me. Then they grew perfectly calm, and I was floating down the stream.

I can hardly tell when the fever abated. The harvest-moon was shining on the night when Sir Adrian caught me by the river; it was the middle of October when one morning I opened my eyes to sense and reason and saw the sunlight flickering on the wall.

I heard afterward what had passed: and I think this is the best place to tell it.

Sir Adrian had raised me in his arms and carried me back to the house, to her ladyship's boudoir, where the terrible charge had been brought against me. He laid me on the couch, and then went in search of his mother. She came, and they stood one on either side of me.

"Mother," he said, "do you know who this is—this girl who has been nameless and friendless, against whom you brought a charge of theft, whom you have ordered from the only shelter she has ever known? Do you know who she is?"

"Neither I nor anyone else can answer that question," replied Lady Caryl.

"I can answer it," declared Sir Adrian; "I know who she is. She is the daughter and heiress of the late squire."

"I do not believe it!" cried her ladyship; but her face grew ghastly white,

"Read those papers," said Sir Adrian, "and then you must believe."

Slowly her ladyship read them through, then laid them down.

"Do you believe now?" asked Sir Adrian.

"I must believe," she answered; but the words were spoken in protest, even against her will. Then after a few moments' thought, she added, "What a terrible mistake! I wonder the old squire could rest in his grave! His only child, too!"

"It is plain enough, mother, that these proofs of her identity and the squire's will made in her favor are what she found in the old lumber-rooms. She had hidden them, and meant to destroy them. Do you see the generosity of the deed? She was giving up name, fortune, position—and why? Shall I tell you why, mother?"

"Yes," answered her ladyship; and there were tears in her eyes as she spoke.

"For my sake, and because she could not bear that her gain should be my loss, she was giving up all that she valued most in the world. Mother," he added, quickly, "do you think there is another woman in the world who would do this for me?"

And the tears rained down Lady Caryl's face as she answered that she did not.

"She must have her rights, and have them at once," Sir Adrian went on. "The squire might well speak of righting a wrong! A more cruel wrong than this was never perpetrated. I will send for Mr. Graham to-morrow, and she shall be acknowledged mistress of Heron's Nest at once. It is hers."

"Yes," agreed her ladyship, most unwillingly, "it is hers. But what will the world say?"

"I care nothing for that," replied Sir Adrian. "Mother, you will see that she is known henceforth as Miss Dacre, heiress of Heron's Nest."

Then I was carried upstairs, and my terrible fever began, and lasted until I awoke that morning and saw the sunshine flickering on the wall.

My senses were clear, and I found that my story was known, for the nurses called me Miss Dacre.

When I was able to bear the interview, Lady Caryl came to see me. She was kind and gentle, but evidently ill at ease.

"It has been a terrible mistake, my dear," she said,

bending down to kiss me ; "the squire was greatly to blame. You have been cruelly treated !" She was silent for a few moments, then she continued, "For my share in it I beg your pardon. I was completely misled. I was forced to believe that you were the unacknowledged daughter of an old servant—a friendless dependent on the charity of the house ; and, in treating you as such, I did no wrong. Indeed," she added, after a pause, "I may say that I treated you generously. Of course I had not the faintest idea that you were Gracia Dacre."

I drew her hand to my lips and kissed it.

"I hope I shall never get well, Lady Caryl," I said. "I cannot bear the thought of taking Heron's Nest from Sir Adrian. He is so proud of the old place !"

She smiled a peculiar smile, such as I had never seen on her face before.

"It is your right," she answered. "My son will feel the loss ; but he is not a poor man ; he will soon find another home. No harm has been done to us ; but great harm has been done to you. We must atone for it."

When Lady Caryl did anything, it was always royally done, and she made full amends to me.

"I can never do too much for you," she said to me one day ; "for you would have given up everything you had in the world for my son."

As I grew stronger, I found that the whole county knew of the strange incident which had taken place at the old manor-house. Lady Caryl herself had at once made it public ; and, as accounts of it has appeared in all the newspapers, everyone in England knew how the poor companion had become the proud owner of Heron's Nest.

The day came when I was well enough to discuss my future with Lady Caryl. I had not seen Sir Adrian since my illness began. Lady Caryl had promised me from day to day that when I was a little better he should be present at the consultation we were going to have. It was one of the last days of October, and I was carried into the library on my couch.

How it brought back old times to me, to see that room again, the chair in which my father, the squire, had sat writing, the table on which those precious papers had lain !

It was a bright, warm autumn day ; a few late roses were in bloom, and the chrysanthemums were unusually fine. During all these long weeks I had forgotten Lady Aditha ; but now I remembered her suddenly as the woman whom

I understood Sir Adrian was to marry. I asked Lady Caryl where she was.

"Gone," she replied. "Mrs. Roper has a great dread of illness. As soon as she knew that you had brain-fever, she left, and Lady Aditha went with her."

"I hope—" Then I paused, for the word seemed so difficult to utter. "I hope that my illness did not delay the marriage."

"What marriage?" asked Lady Caryl quickly.

"Did I dream it? I had many dreams when I was ill, and they were so real. I am confused at times. I thought Sir Adrian and Lady Aditha were to be married."

Lady Caryl looked a little perplexed,

"I told you that," she said. "I ought to explain. Lady Aditha's mother and I were great friends, and our children were playmates twenty years ago. It was her mother and I who talked about their marriage then, and I have wished for it ever since."

"Then they were not engaged?" I queried.

"Not perhaps in the strict sense of the word," she replied; "but I have always looked upon them as an engaged couple. I have always thought of Lady Aditha as my son's wife."

"And he has done the same, I suppose?" was my remark; but she did not seem quite so sure of it.

Shortly afterward Mr. Graham came in, followed by Sir Adrian; and, when my eyes fell once more upon his face, I forgot everything. I had seen it last in the moonlight in that supreme hour of my life when he had taken the papers from me.

"Gracia," he said, as he took my hands, "I am so pleased to see you again." Then he sat down by my side; and to my foolish happy heart it was as though he had taken possession of me.

There could be no question, Mr. Graham said, as to the validity of the papers, none as to my rights. I was indeed heiress of Heron's Nest. Then I made my petition to them, and it was that they would not take Heron's Nest from Sir Adrian, but let him keep it. I would accept money from them—enough to live comfortably on—enough to live in luxury—but not Heron's Nest. Sir Adrian loved it; let him keep it.

"You do love it, do you not?" I said, turning to him.

"I do," he returned earnestly; "for it holds the noblest heart in the world."

"But you love it for itself, do you not?" I asked again.

"Yes," he answered with a smile that I never forgot.

"Let me give it to him; let me make it legally his!" I entreated. But Mr. Graham shook his head.

"It cannot be done, Miss Dacre, Heron's Nest his yours, and you must keep it."

Sir Adrian bent down and kissed my hand.

"There could be no better mistress for it, Gracia," he said.

It was arranged that I should remain where I was until Christmas, and that Lady Caryl should stay with me.

"Do you know where I am going, Gracia?" Sir Adrian whispered presently.

I forgot that anyone else was near—I forgot Lady Caryl and the lawyer, as I clung to the hands that held mine.

"Where are you going?" I asked quickly. "Oh, Sir Adrian, do not go! Stay here."

He bent his head still lower.

"Gracia," he said, in a low tone, "I could not stay here just now, dear. It would be hardly right. I am going to Spain. I shall see the old church in Granada where your mother and the squire were married, and I shall see the white marble cross with the name 'Isola' upon it. Are you content?"

"Must you go?" I cried.

"Yes, Gracia," he said; "it is imperative; but I shall be back for Christmas, and you will be quite well by then. I shall go hoping to find you better—nay, well—when I return."

He went; and I, growing better and stronger every day, did nothing but count the hours until his return.

CHAPTER XII.

It was Christmas Eve again; but how changed was all the world to me! Last year a nameless outcast, this year I was Gracia Dacre, heiress of Heron's Nest; and, with swiftly-falling tears, I offered up my thanks to Heaven.

Nothing could have been kinder than the world's welcome to me. I contrasted it with that accorded to me when I first came to the old manor-house. I learned many lessons then, that I should never have learned otherwise.

The wonder excited by my story did not last long. I heard afterward that no one was very much surprised ; people confessed that they had not thought of it before. The neighboring residents welcomed me most heartily, while they approved highly of Lady Caryl. They said that she had done the right and proper thing—that, by remaining with me for a time, she had shown the greatest magnanimity and generosity ; and the whole county warmed to her ladyship as it had never warmed before.

Lady Caryl thought it better to change most of the new servants, but not the older ones ; they were only too delighted to know that I was the old squire's daughter.

I must confess that I enjoyed the first call made by Mrs. and Miss Sale. When I was simply Gracia, without a second name, they had treated me with the coldest contempt ; they treated Miss Dacre with the utmost respect. Mrs. Sale held out her arms to me, and would have embraced me ; but I could not suffer her to do that.

"My dearest child," she cried effusively, "you must do your best to make up for those wasted years now. Anything that we can do—my daughter and myself—we will do most willingly."

Lady Caryl cut her raptures very short.

"To think," sighed Mrs. Sale, "that the last of the Dacres was living among us, and we did not know it!"

She made me many overtures of friendship ; and her daughter, who had never had a civil word for the friendless girl, was fawningly polite to the heiress of Heron's Nest ; but I could not encourage their advances.

Lady Caryl, in talking to me about the future, said that she fancied Sir Adrian would purchase an estate in Norfolk. She expressed great affection for me, and said that, if the idea met with my approval, I should spend next season in town with her. I did not tell her why the suggestion pleased me so much. I knew that, if I were in town with her, I should see her son almost every day.

Sir Adrian wrote to me from Spain, and told me that he had seen the church where my mother and father were married—that he had seen the marriage register and the marble monument that bore the name of "Isola." He added—and I kissed the written words again and again—that he should be back at Christmas, and hoped to spend it at Heron's Nest.

And Christmas came with a pure mantle of snow and a crown of green holly. All that had passed since the

Christmas before would have seemed like a dream but that it was so happily true. This Christmas Eve was exactly like the last, cold and clear, and beautiful, with the stars shining brightly. There among them shone the luminous star that had led me only last year to the postern-gate. Little need to ask whither its light had led me now! I could hear the bells chiming, as I had heard them years before. "Christmas is come—Christmas is come!" Every word came so clearly to me over the snow.

Heron's Nest that Christmas Eve looked most picturesque, and I had taken great pains to make it so. Mistletoe and holly hung in profusion on the walls of the grand old mansion. Christmas was indeed come, bringing with it love and peace. No harsh word disturbed the harmony that reigned throughout the house.

I had resisted every effort that Lady Caryl made to relinquish her position. I was determined that, so long as she remained in the house, she should be complete mistress of it; and, when she discovered that, she showed her appreciation by increased kindness to me. We had both agreed that the old manor-house looked its fairest and best on Christmas Eve. Every picture-frame, every pillar was wreathed with holly and laurel. There was no doubt about its being Christmas, and the gay appearance of Heron's Nest unmistakably proclaimed it.

Sir Adrian was to come that night, just as he had done on Christmas Eve the year before, through the starlight, over the snow. Oh, happy Christmas that was to bring him to me! I did not reflect whether his stay would be long or short; I did not try to foresee any ending; all my thoughts were concentrated on the fact that I was to see him.

Lady Caryl had ordered my dress—pale rose silk, trimmed with white tulle—and I wore diamond ornaments. Yes, I—Gracia, who last year was a friendless dependent—wore the Dacre diamonds, and at my throat and in my hair was fastened a sprig of laurestinus. May Heaven forgive me if, as I looked in the glass, I felt a thrill of pride! I could not help seeing then that I was beautiful, and I was glad.

The bells of Heronsdale Church had not ceased chiming, and the moon was shining white and high in the heavens. Feeling restless and impatient, I went to one of the windows of the drawing-room, whence I could see the drive. This was my home now, and I must bid him welcome to it.

When at last I saw the carriage, I never thought of etiquette, but hastened to the hall-door to be the first to greet him ; and I remember no more until a handsome face, cold with the fresh air, touched mine, and the voice I loved best on earth cried "Gracia !" Then I bade him welcome home. After that both of us must have forgotten everything else in the world but each other, as we stood on the top of the great flight of steps by the wide-open hall-door, the ruddy light streaming out upon the snow.

Presently he unclapsed his arms, and, going into the hall, he took down a large fur-cloak that was hanging there, and wrapped it round me.

"Come with me, Gracia," he said. "I have something to say to you ; and I can say it nowhere else but at the old postern-gate."

I went with him down the terrace-steps, across the lawn, and over to the postern-gate. The ivy-mantled wall was covered with snow, as it had been a twelvemonth before, and the bright Christmas star was shining overhead. I did not tremble ; but a feeling of awe came over me. He had not spoken as we walked along, but, when we stood near the ivy, and the wind stirred the green leaves and the snow fell, he caught me in his arms and kissed me passionately.

"Oh, Gracia," he cried, "here, where the light of the star first led you to me—let me ask you—will you be my wife?"

I took courage and looked up into his face.

"What of Lady Aditha?" I asked, blushing.

"Lady Aditha is going to marry the Duke of Cortland," he laughed. "She was very fond of me when I was a little boy ; but, to tell you the truth, Gracia, she ceased to care for me when she found that I had lost Heron's Nest."

"Did you care?" I asked falteringly.

"Not at all. Why, Gracia, I have always loved you, and no one but you ! On the night I first saw you—you, with your beautiful dark eyes and sweet quaint name—I loved you. I loved you then, and I have loved you ever since. Will you be my wife, Gracia?"

I could not speak for very excess of joy.

"I shall never love anyone else," he went on. "My love for you, Gracia, will never change. Will you be my wife?"

I said "Yes ;" and then I in my turn told him how I had loved him.

So we plighted our troth under the light of the stars, with the Christmas snow lying white on the ground and the bells chiming—a troth that has never been broken, and will be kept while life lasts.

It was thither that the light of the Christmas star led me, and its rays shine warm in my heart even now.

THE END.

Alarmed at the Condition

of her surroundings, with friends and family thoroughly disgusted by the accumulation of dirt from cellar to garret, and parlor to kitchen, many a woman undertakes a gigantic reform in one chapter and in one week. Life is rendered almost unendurable during that time, and at the end of it she—the heroine of the house-cleaning,—collapses, and goes to bed for a fortnight. If she used Sapolio every week in the year the dirt would be kept down, and the paint, and the pots and pans would be easily brightened in a few hours. 10c. a cake at all grocers.

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